

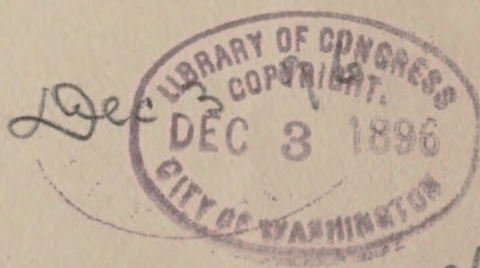




BURRILL COLEMAN,
COLORED.

A
TALE OF THE COTTON FIELDS.

BY
JEANNETTE DOWNES COLTHARP.



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DEDICATED
TO
MY HUSBAND.

CHAPTER I.

It is a queer sight to see one of the Anchor Line's immense steamboats landed at a little platform entirely surrounded by water, and unloading freight as seriously as if the stage-plank rested upon solid rock.

There is something ludicrous in the comparison of the stately vessel with its gleaming white frame towering high above, and the frail rough plank and rougher trestle-work of the place whereon the freight must be deposited. The line of levee a few hundred yards further inward looks more fitted to the purpose, even though it rises only a few inches above the water's bosom, but great steamboats, heavily laden, cannot wade through five feet of water, and if they could there would be vehement opposition raised by the inhabitants on the other side of the embankment, whose houses scarcely peep above the levee's crest.

On the opposite side of the platform from the pulsing steamer with its hurrying deck-hands and commanding mate, a skiff, a bateau and a flat are tied, giving the little wooden island an air of business importance both cheery and interesting. A small warehouse built of rough lumber stands to the north, its interior given up to the tawny waters that fill it almost to the tops of its doors, and lap with soothing monotony against its outer walls as the motion of the boat tosses the waves restlessly about. A long thicket of young willows and cottonwoods stretch to the right and to the left, marking by its abrupt discontinuance the point where the bank and river meet. 'Way over on the Mississippi shore, showing like a murky finger-mark on the horizon, the trees part the blue-grey of the heavens and the

grey-blue of the reflecting water, dispelling the illusion that all is one illimitable element.

Across the levee from the landing, the southern land, with its level far-reaching acres, lies frank and open as a maiden's brow. Has our country no secrets to conceal, no thoughts to hide from the world's gaze, that it spreads like a smoothed-out scroll, open to the reading of any whose gaze may rest upon it, indifferent to his scrutiny? Not a hill nor a cliff, neither mountain nor ravine confronts the stranger, to hint of heart throbs and chastisements that left deep furrows to proclaim a past or suggest tales of experience that might enchain a listener long and unwearingly. Declaring candor by her youthful mein, who could accuse her of harkening to the subtle river's wooing, and meeting his advances with eager arms? Does she feel revengeful toward that arch plotter, man, and greet her lover all the more fondly for the barrier his love of gold has raised to keep her from her lord, who long ago had undisputed right to her caresses at his majestic will? Who could guess what a passionate, courageous nature underlies so much seeming tranquility, as she basks in the most golden of sunlight beneath the bluest of all skies? Is she really nothing more than the child she looks, with her smooth rosy cheek, that she sings and laughs so innocently today, and weeps so pathetically tomorrow? Dealing absolute justice now, and raging vindictively anon, while through it all, we, her dolls, love her as yearningly, as fervently as her generosity and tenderness merit. Ambition or restlessness may lead us, her children, far away from her dark soil and vivid vegetation, but one by one we drift back again, homesick and weary, to the welcome that is ever here—more loyal, more trustful, than ever before. We fold our tents and boastfully go, but as surely as nature's grandest artery glides forever by to meet the waters of

the gulf, we come again humbled by our folly, acknowledging that potent charm which is a tradition with us, yet one which no one has yet been able to analyze. By and by, perhaps, we may cease to defy the bond that holds us, and with folded wings avow what we can but know, that this is our Eden, and we, the gardeners, are here to train its immeasurable possibilities and obliterate its limitations.

The sun hung like a great illuminated orange just above the belt of wood in the western distance, put there ostensibly for the purpose of concealing where the sky and land meet. Its last rim, glowing softer and redder all the while, drops behind the dusky trees just as the last package is deposited upon the platform. The boat-bell gives a series of deep-toned sounds, followed by the musical tinkling of the smaller signals, and then with a great "chouff" from her vitals, the majestic creature lifts her stage-plank tenderly. With a grace and dignity exceeded by no living thing, she glides backward and swinging around, seemingly reluctant to say farewell, is soon in the current speeding upon her way.

"Ben."

"Yes sir."

"It is too late to boat this freight over to the shore to-night, yet I dislike exceedingly to leave it here until Monday."

"It sho' is too late to tote it over to-night, Boss. But what kin we do? It's mighty bad for them boats to fetch freight here this time of a Sat'day."

Ben imitated Mr. Barrett's attitude and air of concern, and they stood there side by side, the black man and the white, each with his hands thrust to the utmost depths of his trousers' pockets, and each staring at the pile of freight as though the solution of the problem might be revealed by some hitherto undiscovered arrangement of the various boxes and barrels.

"Well," said Mr. Barrett in a voice that plainly showed his disappointment and perplexity, "It is growing late and I must return to the store. Give me the freight bills and I will go." He walked to the edge of the platform, and turning spoke to the landing-keeper again: "Ben, you must watch this freight, and not let anything happen to it."

"All right, sir. You reckon I ought to kiver it with the tarp'lins?"

"No, I hardly think that necessary; there is no probability of its raining." Mr. Barrett seated himself in the skiff, and Ben Simpson, stepping in after, took up the oars and rowed swiftly across the submerged field between the landing and the levee. By and by where the waters now lie tranquil and glassy, luxuriant cotton will wave in the summer breeze, its roots nurtured by the new deposit left as toll for the river's trespassing. When the skiff landed at the levee, both men got out; Mr. Barrett to mount his horse and ride to his place of business in the village, and the negro to go to his cabin standing a few yards from the road. Ben tied the skiff to a stake driven in the top of the levee and picked up the oars to carry them with him for safe keeping. As he threw these under his front gallery, two dogs rushed out of the house to greet him, upsetting as they came a little two-year old boy, Ben's baby, who was standing in the doorway eating his supper. As the little fellow toppled over, his chubby feet pointing for a moment at the rafters, he clung to his tin plate with only a slight loss of molasses; but his piece of corn bread fell from his hand and it was not long before its absence was perceived.

"What's Buddy crying about? You, Jakey, you tend to your buddy! You know I got to finish i'nin' your pa's shirt!"

Jakey, not many sizes larger than Buddy, harkened

to his mother's voice, and giving his suspenders a habitual readjustment by slipping first one thumb then the other beneath the osnaburg straps and lifting each successively with a swing of his whole body, came forward and assisted his little brother to his feet, inquiring what was the matter.

Buddy extended his sticky empty hand and complained, his big black eyes rolling, "B'e'd, b'e'd!"

Jakey looked about, and finally found the missing substantial under the cupboard near the doorway. He brushed off the loose dirt and restored it to its owner, who contentedly resumed dipping it into his molasses and munching off the sweetened surface. Jakey went back to the corner of the fire-place and again occupied himself with a piece of soft drift wood which he was, with the aid of an old butcher knife, constructing into an "Anchor Line."

Ben had in the meanwhile come into the house and seated himself not far from the ironing-board and begun playing with the dogs who followed him in, fawning upon him.

"Ben, how us goin' to church to-night,—can't go, kin you?" Elvira questioned, pausing in her ironing to test the heat of her implement.

"Oh, I don't know; why?"

"Nothin', I was just studyin' about the freight. Didn't the 'City of the South' put off a big lot? She staid a mighty long time."

"Yes, but that don't matter, I reckon. Perry Johnson's levee guard, you know, and while he's got to keep awake anyhow, he can watch the landin' too, just as well. I'll ask him to do it."

"Well." Elvira made her iron hiss again and went on with her work. "I wanted to know, not so much on my 'count as Ella's. Ella Green come along here just 'while ago and askt ef us was goin' to church,

'cause she said she wanted to go 'long with us ef we was. She said she didn't keer 'bout goin' though 'thout you was going to 'zort, 'cause she said she pintedly wanted to hear you. She said she'd come along 'bout time for us to start, and she 'lowed she hoped you wouldn't disappoint her."

Ben felt considerably pleased with the compliment paid to his powers as an exhorter, and sat for a while in meditation; then he roused himself and exclaimed:

"Look here, Elviry, put your ir'nin' down; I wants my supper, 'pecially ef I got to go see Perry 'fore we starts to church. Ef we goin' we got to git there early on recount of its bein' my night to 'zort."

"Well, I reckon you wont go till I gits your shirt ir'ned, will you?" Elvira responded playfully. "Ef you wants your supper, help yourself; the meat's in the skillet on that side of the hearth, and the bread's in the oven over there. I spect you knows where the molasses is."

"Papa, there's some potatoes in de ashes," Jakey commented, indifferently.

"La, there sho is! I had plumb forgot." Elvira began poking in the ashes, and sure enough there they were, wrinkled and sticky, with the syrup that had simmered through cracks in the skins candied on the outside. Jakey had not forgotten the sweet potatoes if his mother had. He had been waiting for the time when she would announce that they were done; so he laid his knife and steamboat aside and moved nearer. Buddy came forward too, and eagerly watched Jakey trying to cool that hottest of hot things, an ash baked sweet potato. He no doubt thought the cooling process unnecessarily long, but it is not the little darkey's habit to fret, and true to his class, he contented himself with petting the cat, and was at last rewarded for his patience with a nice potato soaking in spare-rib gravy.

"Honey, who you reckon I seen on the 'City of the South'?" Ben asked suddenly, looking up at his wife.

"La, Ben, how you spec I know. Who was it?"

Ben laid the bone he was picking in the plate upon his knee, and after deliberately wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, answered:

"T'was Jeff Chesterfield."

"Well I never! When did he get out the penitency?"

"He say he been out six months. Say he been up the river. He asked lots of questions about how us all was gitten' 'long, and told me to tell everybody 'howdy' for him."

"How long he goin' to stay?"

"He never got off; he's a regular rouster now. Say he likes runnin' on the river mighty well."

"Well, sir! I must tell Mattie about Jeff, so she can go to the boat to see him next time she passes. All them girls will want to see him, 'cause Jeff, he used to have every last one of 'em stuck on him."

"They was that," laughed Ben, "and seems like to me there was somebody named 'Elviry' 'mongst the lot too." Ben winked and smiled broadly at Elvira, who giggled, somewhat confused.

"Oh, well," she said, "that was before you found out how to go down into your pockets at picnics and such like." She laughed again and added: "What I got to leave wid you, too, is that the 'stuck' wasn't all on one side, neither."

"Un-hoo, oh yes, I understan'," mumbled Ben, mockingly, shaking his head. He put his empty plate on the table, gave a long yawn of satisfaction, and picked up his old hat. "Well, give us a kiss, and I'm off to see Perry." He put his arm around his wife's plump shoulders and gave her a rousing smack, then stopped in the door-way to ask, "You goin' to leave the chillun with Aunt Nancy, ain't you?"

"Yes, I reckon so. Aunt Nancy's always willin' to look after 'em for me, and she's the nearest one to leave 'em with."

"All right then, you be sure to be ready ginst I git back."

Ben walked briskly out to the road that followed the base of the levee, and turning into it, he went only a short distance before he was accosted.

"Hello, Elder, is that you?"

"That's who it is," Simpson returned cheerily, "and you are the very man I'm hunting for. How's your health?" Without waiting for Perry to reply, Ben launched into the business that brought him to seek the interview.

"That's all right, I'll do it for you—certainly, certainly," Perry assented readily. "You're right late gittin' started though, ain't you?"

"No, I reckon not. It don't take me long to go five miles after I put my foot into the road. You see, Perry, the particularest reason I'm so anxious to go is, that 'sides its bein' my night to 'zort, I ain't never missed a single night bein' there in the whole three weeks the meetin' been goin' on, and it would look kind a odd for me to miss the very night I'm spected, don't you know."

"Exactly, of course, I understand."

"Well, so long! I'm a thousand times obliged to you, Perry, and I'll do you a good turn first chance I git."

"Oh, that's all right," again declared good-natured Perry, and as Ben turned and retraced his steps homeward, Perry ascended the path that slanted diagonally up the tall embankment, preparatory to beginning his silent vigil of the night.

CHAPTER II.

When he reached the top of the levee, Perry turned his face toward the stream, and lifted his chest to inhale a deep delicious breath of the soft dreamy air. The moon was already up, and hung above the trees on the other side of the water, round and full; making the land, trees and river gleam white and radiant where there were no shadows, or deeply black where objects obstructed her rays. A mocking bird, anticipating summer by the day's promise of spring, swayed upon a branch of a pecan tree and sang a glorious nocturn to the little maiden listening in the willows.

The pecan tree that harbored the noble lover stood some distance out from the levee, with the waters lapping its bark high up, and branding a collar about the trunk that would be a living record of their height after summer months sent the river, humbled, down within its banks. In its infancy this tree shaded a ditch bank and turnrow, far back in the fields. It sprang from a pecan that dropped from a little boy's pocket, and had thrived in the untrodden spot. It began its career fully three-quarters of a mile from the river's bank, and had stood its ground sturdily through storm and sunshine. It had seen the ruthless waters encroaching nearer and nearer each year, until now, when it reared its handsome head in seeming consciousness of its strength and completed height, it stood but a stone's throw from the creeping tyrant that asked but a few years more to claim it as his prey. Then the powerful roots will be undermined, the vigorous boughs will sway pathetically, and with a roar the

tree will crash forward, a hopeless victim to an insatiate greed.

Why the river selected this particular spot to vent his vindictiveness upon, we can never know. It may have been a particularly toothsome morsel, or there may have been a cause long years before the white man's foot touched the river shore, why this mile of front should be blotted from the earth's face, while across the stream, and a few miles further down, nature saw fit to donate the stolen soil where it never belonged. It reminds us of man's changes as well as nature's, for where one man's hoard is steadily increasing, another is as surely yielding up his store.

The tree will stand a few years still to tell us of the past, but the little boy, with grey streaks in his hair, bends over his desk in a city. The scant acres that time has left of his ancestral home are inadequate to justify him in trying to live upon them, and they have passed into another's hands.

Perry turned first to the right and looked down the levee, and then to the left, and shouldering his rifle again, he concluded to take the path to the left, as he could then begin to fulfil his promise to Ben at the outset of his watch. His beat extended half a mile on either side of the path where he ascended the levee; and it made no difference which direction he took first. It was his duty to walk from one end of his appointed position to the other, throughout the night, beginning whenever he chose.

He was a small man, slender, strong and wirey, with a pleasant black face and an agreeable manner. Like Ben Simpson, he was fond of good clothes, but unlike Ben, who was an elder in the church, Perry wasn't a seeker after religion. The love of gambling had a strong hold upon his nature, and although he enjoyed going to church and funerals, he acknowledged that he liked

balls better, so the Mississippi's cleansing waters had never submerged his person and his sins, except when he was thrown out of a dug-out one day, by the carelessness of a companion.

No, Perry had never "got religion," notwithstanding the prayers for his conversion that had more than once been earnestly offered up by the congregation that numbered his mother among its members.

Perry walked to the northern limit of his beat, met the guard of the next station, exchanged friendly greetings, and going to the other end, passing the landing twice, noticing that everything looked serene in the moonlight. As he again turned and was walking up the river, he passed the point where the road coming from Sigma merged into the road at the levee, and he paused to look about him. A man was riding leisureably from the village, toward him, and Johnson was quick to recognize him. As soon as the horseman drew near enough, he called out cordially: "Hello, Burrill! Where you bound?"

"Why, hello, Johnson, that you, how do you do sir?"

"I'm tollerable, thank you, how's yourself?"

"Pretty fair, pretty fair. Fine night, ain't it?" Burrill Coleman clucked to his horse, and started on his way; then turning in his saddle, he faced Perry, and asked: "Have you got any tobacco about you, Johnson? I clean forgot to get some before I left town, and I don't believe I can wait till I get home for a chew."

Johnson laid his rifle down on the levee, and felt in one after another of his pockets. Presently drawing out a piece of tobacco, he started down the side of the embankment to take it to his friend, but Burrill checked him:

"Just wait," he said, "I'll come up after it. I ain't in no hurry, and you got a heap sight more walkin' to do tonight than I is."

Coleman dismounted and hitched his horse to a fence post on the other side of the road.

He was not much above medium height, but he bore himself with so much composure and dignity that he gave the impression of greater stature than he possessed. He was always well dressed and neat, and there was none of that loose-jointedness about him, nor slack fit in his clothes that is so characteristic of his race. He was unmistakably handsome, too, though so thoroughly negro in his type. His complexion was just the color of the wrapper of a good mild cigar, and his eyes bright, and quick in their movements. His thick lips were partly hidden by his short jetty moustache, and his nose unusually high, though wide, for a darkey's, indicated strength and tenacity. Altogether, such an intelligent face for a negro is seldom seen, nor such command over people's respect as he possessed, is often felt. When his horse, as well kept and as handsome of its kind as Burrill was of his, was secured, he climbed up the levee, swinging a lantern in his hand as he came.

"Well, sir!" exclaimed Johnson, jocosely, eyeing the lantern, "Burrill, you must expect a change of weather 'fore you gits home; what is you carryin' a lantern for, this bright night?"

Coleman joined in his friend's laughter and answered: "Well you see, it's this a way: When anybody borrys something of mine, and keeps it a year, the first time they says somethin' about 'turnin' it back to me, I allays says, 'Yes sir, I'll take it along with me, bein' as I am goin' that a way.' That," he added, "is one of the finest lanterns you ever seen sir. It's a regular conductor's lantern. I bought just 'cause it was so pretty. You see the glass is red, and makes the prettiest kind of a light. Ever see a conductor's lantern lighted? Let me show you."

Coleman proceeded to light the lantern to show its beauties to the appreciative gaze of the country fellow who had never lived nearer than eight miles to a railroad. While he was striking a match and adjusting the wick, Johnson said, more by way of filling an awkward pause than anything else: "You 'pears to take mighty good care of it; it looks bran new."

"Oh, it ain't so new. It was second-hand when I bought it. You see its all nickel-plated, that's what makes it look so bright." Having succeeded in making the light burn brightly, Burrill held it high above his head and asked proudly: "Ain't she a beaut?"

"She sho is."

"Now, you see," went on Coleman, "when a conductor wants his train to go on, he holds it so the engineer can see it, and waves it this a way. Then, when he wants the train to stop, he does—"

"Halt!" thundered a voice so close that Coleman and Johnson sprang back in dismay. Standing a few paces from them on the levee, was a man with rifle at his shoulder, ready to fire. For a moment Perry's eyes, blinded by gazing at the colored light, failed to recognize the assailant; then he called excitedly:

"Hello, Jim. Hold up there, it's me—Perry—don't you know me, man. For God's sake, don't shoot!"

Jim's rifle slowly sank to his side, and Burrill laughed in relief.

"By George!" said the new comer, "I didn't know what to make of you fellows there with that red light, when I first seen you. I thought you all was some rascal tryin' to cut the levee."

"Hump," muttered Coleman, contemptuously, "you must have thought we was mighty showy in our way of doin' it."

Perry laughed, but Jim, putting his hand on his breast, wagged his head seriously.

"You all don't know what a turn you give me," he said. "My heart's just a beatin'—"

"Well, try some of this to steady your nerves," Coleman suggested, with a return of his equanimity, offering a flask of whisky. Jim took a long pull at it, and handed it back to its owner with a smack of his lips. Burrill passed the bottle on to Perry, then taking a drink himself, he sat down on the edge of the levee with his feet hanging toward the road. His companions followed his example as he asked:

"How's the water?"

"Oh, she's fallin' fast now," answered Johnson. "Goin' down like the bottom had dropped out all of a sudden."

"She can't go down any too fast to suit me," said Burrill. "I tell you, sirs, I never feels easy till she's plumb back in her banks again."

"I don't know," drawled Jim, thoughtfully. "I don't never feel scared much, when the levee's as strong and big as it is here. Fact is, I don't see why they don't discharge us guards now, the water is fallin' so fast. What they want guards on good levees for, anyway, Burrill?"

"Why man, it's just this a way: sluffin' levees and crawfish holes ain't all we got to be afraid of."

"Hum!" interrupted Perry, "I should say not. Why, Jim, you know well enough they give you that gun and stood you up on this levee to shoot anybody that tried to cut it."

"Well, of course, Perry, I know that, but who they reckon would be fool enough to cut a levee? They'd know as well as anybody hit would ruin the country."

Burrill laughed. "Why, man, 'tain't nobody livin' here that'd want to cut it, but just s'posin somebody had a weak levee in front of their house, fifteen or twenty miles above here, and they'd take a notion to

come down here and make a little hole in our levee to let the water spread in here, and ease up the strain up their way, don't you reckon it would be a help to him? Or, s'posin somebody had two or three hundred fine cypress logs back there in the swamp that they'd like to float down to New Orleans, don't you reckon it would be money in their pocket if the levee would break somewhere close about, so the water would come and lift they raft and help 'em get it out into the river?"

"You don't say!" muttered Jim in amazement. "Do you know, I never thought of such a thing! Lord, Lord! You reckon anybody would be mean enough to 'stroy a whole country, and drown out every cow and hog like that?"

Burrill Coleman smiled grimly. "I have heard of such things bein' done," he said.

"Well, I just tell you what's a fact," began Perry, grasping his rifle nervously, "them kind of people ought to be shot down in they tracks like wild beas'es. I'd—I'd—if I'd catch a man on my beat, up to any such rascality, I wouldn't show him any more mercy than I would a mad dog."

"You mighty right," assented Jim, vehemently. "Well," he added, after a pause, "that bein' the case, I don't keer how long they keeps us men on the levee just so they pays me my two dollars a night. Sleepin' tas'es just as good to me in day time anyhow."

As Jim was saying this, Burrill began to hum a tune softly to himself. Perry heard him and said:

"Sing that, Burrill, that's one of my favorites," and Burrill commenced with the chorus of that rousing song, "I'll meet you in the City of the New Jerusalem."

Jim, a regular church goer, and Perry, both joined in, although the latter did not know all the words, and the trio sounded superb, floating out upon the calm night, with the Mississippi's mighty bosom for a sounding-board. Burrill sang in his strong, rich bass, while Jim

sang ordinarily, and Perry pitched his voice as high as a woman's, and hummed when he did not know the words.

With excellent voices, the rule among the negro race, it seems strange that the world has never produced either a remarkable tenor or prima donna from its ranks.

When the song was finished, Jim slapped his hand upon his knee and exclaimed:

"That was splendid! It does me good all over to hear such a chune as that. Come, let's sing another."

Without hesitating, he began "Am I soldier of the Cross." This hymn, too, was sung, and was followed by several more, when Johnson jumped to his feet, exclaiming:

"Look here boys, I hates to tear myself away from good company, but I got to be goin'. Ef the captain of the guards was to happen along about now, he might think us all was havin' too good a time."

"I wonder who's the captain for tonight?" said Jim, getting on his feet. "It might be Mr. Barrett; he ain't been now for more'n a week."

"Well, 'tain't likely they'll be a captain out tonight. Everybody seems to feel satisfied ain't nothin' goin' to happen now the water's fallin'," said Burrill, yawning.

"Well," said Perry, "captain or no captain, whoever he is, or whenever he comes along, I'm thankful to say he ain't caught me nappin' yet. Whether he comes along at ten, twelve, four, or between times, Perry's always been on duty o. k."

Burrill picked up his lantern from where he had put it behind him, as he sat down to talk, and extinguished it; then the three darkeys started off in their several directions.

As the two levee guards resumed their marching, they would have been astonished if told that they had spent an hour and a half in singing, and conversation.

CHAPTER III.

"Virgil, ask your father to *please* come to his breakfast. Tell him that the bell has been rung for him twice, and every thing is getting cold." Mrs. Barrett spoke impatiently, but the little boy she addressed, as he dashed into the room, was too much excited to heed her manner, and scarcely caught the meaning of her words.

"Oh, mother, 'he can't come! He's out on the gallery talking to Mr. Henderson and Mr. McStea. The landing was robbed last night, and ever so many things stolen!"

"What, robbed!" cried Mrs. Barrett and Nellie in one voice, starting from the table in astonishment. Little Stella, apprehending that something dreadful had happened, lifted her troubled, inquiring face, not knowing what to say. Mrs. Barrett and Miss Barrett, preceded by Virgil, hurriedly left the room to hear the particulars of the robbery, leaving the little girl seated in her high-chair, close to the table. Stella did not know what robbery meant, but she understood what this implied thoroughly. She lifted her voice and shrieked:

"Mama, sitter, brozzer! Oh, somebody, come and put me down!" They had all forgotten her helpless position, though, and the tiny maiden was abandoning herself to despair, when Allen came into the room to bring hot waffles and released her. She, too, ran to the gallery then, but too late to hear any of the news, for her father's partner and clerk were already down the steps, and Mr. Barrett was saying:

"If you wont come in and take breakfast with us,

then, I will eat as quickly as I can and join you at the office, where we can discuss this more fully and decide what can be done."

The callers left, and the family returned to the breakfast table.

"All we know," said Mr. Barrett, in answer to his children's inquiries, as he unfolded his napkin, "is that several boxes containing freight were broken open, and Mr. Henderson estimates the loss roughly at something between five and seven hundred dollars. It is the boldest and most unprecedented theft I ever knew to occur in this parish. The boxes were evidently opened with the aid of a crowbar, as one was found lying on the platform, and it is very remarkable that this, which necessitated more or less noise, could have been done without attracting the attention of the levee guards."

"Perhaps the robbers watched their chance, and opened the boxes while the guards were at the further ends of their beats," suggested Mrs. Barrett.

"Even granting that," said Mr. Barrett, "the water magnifies sound, and the trees echo so ringingly, I do not see how Perry and Jim could have failed to hear the noise."

Mr. Barrett eat as hurriedly as he could between his remarks to his wife and children, and was soon on his way to the store where he expected to find Mr. Henderson and Mr. McStea awaiting him.

The firm of Barrett & Henderson was one of several concerns of the kind in the parish, owning vast tracts of land and employing hundreds of colored people as laborers. Barrett & Henderson owned about seven thousand acres of cultivated land, divided into numerous plantations and managed, including all ages, fully a thousand negroes. These negroes bought their necessities from the stores on the various plantations, paying for them at the end of the year, when cotton

and cotton seed went to market. In this way, they, like the similar companies, did an immense system of credit business that left little for the small cash dealer to do. When there is no overflow, no cotton worms, no drouth and no deluge from the skies, the merchant-planter, and the darkey too, fairly coins money and rolls in wealth. On the other hand, when circumstances agree to combine against him, the negro gets his food and wearing apparel throughout the year, just the same, and his only trouble is that he hasn't much if any money to spend for whisky and trifles at Christmas; but the merchant has an empty safe and a regiment of creditors to confront. If nothing runs through the little end of the horn, nothing can be expected to flow out of the big end. The planter can bridge over a year or two of such adversities well enough, and be fairly set upon his feet again by one good crop, but the tide of successive failures is hard to stem.

Barrett & Henderson's most important plantation, Englehart, five miles from Sigma, was the largest of their places, and did the next biggest furnishing business to the house in the village, where the head office and the two chiefs of the firm were located. These two partners had many tastes in common, and were warm, congenial friends, although they possessed so many characteristics that were entirely different.

Mr. Henderson, ten years the younger, was married also, and like Mr. Barrett, was a keen-witted business man. He was cool and calculating in his financial relations, with a belief that every man warranted a certain amount of watching, and having this perpetual doubt of his fellow beings in his mind, he acted somewhat as a check upon the elder's more generous trustfulness. He read his daily papers with a religious exactness, at least those portions that treated of politics, the markets or casualties, but he looked upon the rest

of the printed matter as he did upon the blank margins of the sheet—something put there simply to fill up space, or perhaps, to cause women to waste valuable time, as he knew his wife did, who preferred reading Paris or New York fashions to keeping up with the price of meat or flour. Mrs. Henderson was young, though, and her husband hoped with time and gentle reproof to correct this failing of his helpmeet.

On the other hand, Mr. Barrett was what would anywhere be called a cultured man. In 1864 he awoke to the realization that he was eighteen years old, his education hardly more than begun, and the fact staring him in the face that he must go to work for himself or starve. There were too many brothers and sisters younger than himself dependent upon the scant remains of his father's shattered estate for any of it to be devoted to further schooling for himself, so with the courage of youth, he picked up his oar, and began paddling in the direction of the success he now enjoyed. His way lay, at times, along rugged, turbulent places, but hard manual labor never defeated him, and he looked back now upon his training as the best discipline that could have come to him. During his youthful struggles he acquired a love for knowledge, and never lost an opportunity of enlightening himself upon all topics, from then to the present time. He was what could be called a self-made man, but he had had good material handed down to him from a long line of ancestors out of which to make himself.

In personal appearance he was decidedly handsome. He was much above medium height, and rather stout than otherwise. He wore a short dark beard that suited his dark hair and handsome grey eyes. His manners were deliberate and stately, with that elegance of style that once prevailed in Louisiana among ladies and gentlemen, but which has yielded to the careless good-

fellowship between the present day man and woman. Mr. Barrett with his leisurely composure and thoughtfulness of the minor comforts of others, made himself seem a little isolated from those contrasted with him. Not so much in what he did, however, as his way of doing it. Another man could open a door or a gate for a lady, or assist her into a carriage, and there would seem merely a duty done, but when Mr. Barrett performed these little courtesies, there seemed, at the same time, a favor having been craved and a special honor conferred.

When Mr. Barrett reached the office, the two gentlemen who had left him but a half hour before were sitting beside the stove waiting for him. He took his accustomed chair at his desk, and turned around in it to hear what Mr. Henderson was saying.

"In thinking over the matter," Mr. Barrett said, "it seems so improbable that the goods could have been taken without Perry Johnson being aware of it, that I can hardly resist believing that he must know who the thieves are, even if he did not assist them in the robbery."

"That is exactly what I have believed from the first," said Mr. Henderson. "If Perry did not help to steal the goods, he knew how to keep mighty quiet while the others did. No, there is no doubt in my mind that both Perry and Ben got their share of the goods."

"Oh no, not Ben," protested Mr. Barrett. "Of course I blame Ben for not attending to his duty and watching the freight himself as I told him to, but I believe him innocent of the theft."

"He certainly seems worried," began Mr. McStea, but Mr. Henderson cut him off shortly:

"Dudley, how can you tell anything about a nigger, and a half-way preacher at that. You can depend upon it, a darkey will always act his part well."

McStea said no more. He had been working for the firm of Barrett & Henderson long enough to have learned some of the peculiarities of the latter gentleman's disposition.

"But, Henderson, you must admit that until last night Ben has always attended to his landing business scrupulously and entirely satisfactorily. He has often had large sums of money, that the boats paid him for seed, in his possession; sums far exceeding the amount of the goods stolen last night."

Henderson was silent.

"If I may make a suggestion," put in McStea, "I would say that the goods were stolen by some stray craft—a flat-boat or a dago's lugger—that passed during the night."

"That is plausible," Mr. Barrett said thoughtfully, and Mr. Henderson inquired irritably:

"What if it was, Dudley, could those boxes have been ripped open and the boards split without the levee guards hearing it, especially when everything was in favor of the listeners? The night was perfectly calm, and the moon made almost as much light as day."

"Perry might have dozed off. You know a darkey can sleep any where or at any time," Mr. Barrett urged.

"But he swears he never closed his eyes from the time he went on duty till daylight. And he says he saw no one but the levee guards at either end of his beat, except a few people he knew, on their way to church," Mr. McStea said.

"Now look here," said Mr. Henderson; "who knew of the boat's landing, and putting off the freight besides Ben Simpson?"

"Ah, that I do not know," said Mr. Barrett. "I went to the landing myself, as you are aware, because I was particularly anxious to see that the freight was properly stacked upon the platform, besides my wanting to see

Captain Hill. There were a few women standing on the levee when the boat came in, but they went off, for they were not there when I crossed back to get on my horse."

"Do you know who they were?" asked Henderson.

"Well, old Mingo Green's grand-daughter—what's her name? Ella, I believe—was one of them, and Sallie Jefferson was among the number, but I scarcely noticed the group as I passed."

The three men sat for some time in deep thought, then Mr. Henderson jumped to his feet.

"Here," he exclaimed, "this will never do; we must go at this thing if we expect to get back the stolen goods."

"What do you advise?" asked Mr. Barrett, slowly rising.

"Why, first of all, a thorough search of every house on Lilyditch plantation! I hate to have to do such a thing on Sunday, but if it is not done to-day, there will be no use doing it at all. Dudley, did you have the horses saddled?"

"Yes sir, they are ready."

The party started out, followed by the colored store porter, whose interest and curiosity prompted him to go along, and before they were fairly out of Sigma, they were joined by Mr. Chafin, manager of a plantation some ten miles distant, and several other gentlemen, who had heard of the robbery, besides the usual contingent, several boys.

The village of Sigma has very little to recommend it either as a place of business or a place of residence. It is one of the many dozing old towns, put back from the river bank as a mother puts her child back on the bed, to keep it from falling over the edge. There are a post-office, a few stores, and a half dozen residences where white people live, because the bread-winner of

the family is either a doctor, a merchant or a teacher. There is a Knights of Pythias lodge, which is used also as the school house, and a church too, where sometimes a preacher comes and delivers a sermon. These preachers are usually divinity students out for practice, or hardworked religious men with regular appointments at several other places, seldom finding a fifth Sunday or an extra day which can be devoted to Sigma. When a preacher does find an opportunity to come, the news is spread and a congregation is gathered from the surrounding plantations to supplement the one or two pew-fulls that the town can afford. People do not mind riding five or ten miles to church occasionally, even to hear an indifferent sermon.

Sigma has two merits: The first it possesses together with the other swamp towns of Louisiana, that is, the dearth of what the negro contemptuously calls "poor white trash." The poor white man and the poor red soil exist in the state, but their location is further westward, and the river front is given up to the dark man, the dark soil, and the well-to-do whites. One of the strongest attractions of the extreme South, except, of course, in large towns and cities, is the absence of that distressing element, the pauper.

Sigma's other merit, or rather charm, is its long row of shade trees that grow on the sunny side of the one solitary street. The few residences, neat and comfortable, with their gardens of beautiful flowers and shrubs, are at one end of the street and the business houses are along the other, with the row of trees reaching from the limit of the one portion to the last store in the line. These trees alternating, first a china tree with its dark glossy leaves, and then a shimmering, silver-leaf poplar, that at once throws into relief the beauty of its neighbor and enhances the flashing brightness of its own dainty foliage. Yet, as is so often the case, Sigma's

greatest beauty is for a time each year its greatest drawback. Just now, when Spring days are beginning to grow warmer, only here and there the china tree's tiny lilac and purple blossoms have burst into perfection, tender and moist, and they suggest, rather than proclaim perfume; but by and by, when seventy or eighty trees all unite in distilling their wealth of sweets, the air will throb with the power of the odor, and sensitive nostrils will revolt at nature's extravagance. Then, later, weary ears will ache, when the combination of the small boy, the pop-gun and the green china berry is manifestly at large.

CHAPTER IV.

Mr. Barrett and his companions took no time to heed the bursting of leaf or blossom. They rode over the two miles of road, spreading between Sigma and Lilyditch Landing, without noticing any of the things along the way that were invisible because of inevitable presence. As they reached the path that lead from the levee to Simpson's house, that darkey joined them; his yellow face expressive of anxiety and distress.

"Hello, Ben! Anything new?" called Mr. Henderson, seeing him approach.

"No sir, nothin' at all. I ain't been back over there since you and Mr. McStea was there."

"Come, then," said Mr. Barrett, "we will go over now and look about." He spoke with his habitual cheeriness, and dismounting, gave his horse to the darkey, who hitched him to a little tree. Ben then took the other two horses from their riders, and hitched them also, and the three gentlemen from the office seated themselves in the skiff, and Ben sitting to the oars, they were soon landed at the platform, leaving the crowd collected at the levee, to stand there waiting for something else to happen.

There was really nothing for him to see, when Mr. Barrett reached the platform. He took the freight bills from his pocket to assist him in making an inventory of what was lost, and scanned the list and remaining packages. There were the barrels of flour, meal and coal oil, just as he had left them at dusk the day before; and the boxes of meat were there too, but all that was left of the dry goods, consisting of a box each of calico,

check, shoes, and men's clothing, were the empty boxes with their broken tops scattered about.

While the gentlemen were talking to one side in undertones, Ben idly picked up the crow-bar that was lying on the floor near the empty boxes. He had seen the implement when he was there earlier in the morning, and had turned it over with his foot; but now he stooped and took it in his hands. He looked at it closely for a moment, and cried out in astonishment:

"Well sir! Mr. Barrett, take a good look at this here crow-bar. Where you reckon it come from?" As the darkey held it up for inspection, the gentlemen closed about him. Ben went on: "You ain't never seen that thing before, is you?"

"Well if that—Ben, who brought that crow-bar over from Lilyditch gin?"

"God A'mighty knows, Boss."

"Isn't this the one we had at the gin all winter?"

"It pintedly is," Ben asserted, emphatically. "I'd know it anywhere. Don't you see here? I cut this little mark on it myself one day while I was restin'. I picked up a file what was lyin' handy, and tried it on it while Pete an' me set a talkin'."

Mr. Henderson looked at Mr. Barrett. "I suppose you agree with me then, that it was some one on Lilyditch, who committed the robbery," he said tersely.

Just as the gentlemen reached the levee on their return from investigating the platform, the manager and clerk from Englehart plantation rode up. The news of the robbery had reached the plantation before these gentlemen had left, and it was only necessary for Mr. Barrett to relate a few of the particulars to them; then the crowd divided into two searching parties, each starting forth in a different direction, Mr. Barrett leading one party, and Mr. Henderson, the other.

Mr. Barrett led the way immediately to Perry's house,

and as he drew near, he saw that darkey sitting on his front steps, the spring sun shining on his dejected figure. He arose to his feet, and taking his hat off, even more humbly than was his habit, if that were possible, he bowed first to Mr. Barrett and then to the other gentlemen of the party. Mr. Barrett got down from his horse and addressed him kindly :

"Perry, it is my unpleasant duty to make an investigation of your premises," he began, "and endeavor to discover traces of the stolen goods, and if, as I hope, we shall find nothing to convict you, we shall at least succeed in clearing you of all suspicion."

Muffled sobs within the cabin, breaking out afresh, made Perry look uneasily over his shoulder into the room; then he slowly turned his head back and looked up into Mr. Barrett's face.

"God knows, Boss," he began, his voice breaking slightly, "you welcome to search this place from top to bottom, and I'll be glad to have you do it. And, Mr. Barrett, ef taking it out on my back for not tendin' to my duty better, will make you know how I hates what happened last night, you can beat me like a dog, sir, an' I wont say a word. I know I is to blam, an' I ain't going 'spute anybody what says I is; 'cause ef I hadn't promised Ben I look after the landin', he'd a done it his self."

"Well, well, Perry, I hope your distress at this unfortunate occurrence will teach you a lesson. I freely own that I do not suspect you in the least, of being implicated in the robbery, and when we have made such investigation as we deem necessary, I shall clear you of suspicion."

The gentlemen entered the house, and Perry seated himself upon the steps again, scarcely noticing the remarks made to him by the darkeys who having united themselves with the expedition, stood about holding the horses as an excuse for being there.

As Mr. Barrett entered the room, Perry's mother, who was sitting near the fire-place with her apron over her head to stifle her moans, arose to her feet, and dumbly taking a key, tied to a dirty string, from her pocket, she extended it toward the gentlemen with an old-fashioned courtesy. Each of the three white men instinctively shrank from taking it, and Mr. McStea, seeing Mr. Barrett's embarrassment, came to his rescue, and said kindly:

"Oh, come now, Aunt Nancy, brace up. No need of crying like this; uncover your head and open your trunks and things, and we will very soon satisfy ourselves that everything is all right."

The old woman did as she was told, and opened first one thing, then another. She voluntarily turned over the mattresses on the beds, showing that there was nothing concealed beneath them but a few unironed garments, left over from her last washing. There was nothing whatever to point suspicion upon the Johnsons, however, except one pair of new shoes; these were found in the trunk that was opened first of all, and caused Mr. Barrett's brow to pucker with added worry. He looked questioningly at McStea, and that gentleman hastened to reassure him.

"This is all right, Mr. Barrett," he said, looking closer at the shoes. "I sold these to her yesterday. You see," he added, handing a shoe to Mr. Barrett, "this is last winter's stock. Our new shoes were ordered from Fellheim & Stein; this you see is a Newhouse & Son's make."

There were but the usual two rooms to the cabin, the front room, and the shed room in the rear, and with no ceiling over head it was but the work of a few moments to pry into the most secret recesses of the little house. It had its share of newspaper, magazine and advertisement pictures pasted about the walls for ornament; its

average of dirt in the corners and its dust and spider webs upon the rafters and other projections about the rough walls; its liberal sprinkling of dirt-dobber nests wherever those industrious little masons had seen fit to locate their residences, and withal the cabin was like all others, differing from them scarcely more than one egg differs from another in outer semblance. After the rooms were carefully examined, and delivered up nothing of a questionable nature, the gentlemen went outside and searched the chicken house, the pig pen, and the wood pile, but nothing indicated that it concealed anything justifying doubt of Johnson's honesty.

Every house and out building on the plantation, including the gin house and stables, was searched, but to no purpose. In most instances the inmates willingly submitted to the inquisition and only very few exceptions evidenced opposition. In one case a belligerent woman muttered so vindictively at Mr. Henderson, not to him, however, that her husband gave her a slap on the mouth that made her stagger.

"You fool you," he cried wrathfully, "you ain't got the sense you was born wid!"

It took the infuriated woman but a moment to recover from his blow, and with a leap she attacked her assailant savagely. At the first of the encounter the searching party took refuge in ignominious flight, but as long as they were within ear shot they heard a woman's voice raised in protest, and the sound of a strap descending upon human flesh in response. Such little family interviews were not of sufficiently rare occurrence, to excite either much surprise or sympathy among the neighbors, so the searchers went on their way, and finally returned to the store, not one particle wiser than they were when they left it, except that it was evident that the boxes were opened with the aid of a crow-bar, and that the said crow-bar belonged to Lily-

ditch gin, a building situated four or five hundred yards from the levee where the crossing was usually made to the landing.

The robbery was talked of throughout the parish, and elicited no small amount of interest, for such a thing had never happened before, not even in the memory of the very oldest inhabitant.

The next day Mr. McStea, with Perry and Ben as oarsmen, rowed down as far as Vicksburg, in a yawl, inquiring at every landing, if anything had been seen of persons carrying what might have been the stolen goods, but no one was able to give any information whatever upon the matter. When he reached town, Mr. McStea engaged the services of a detective, who promised to do all in his power to discover the stolen goods, but time went on, interest and curiosity wore themselves dull with nothing new to feed upon, but not a trace of the robber or his booty were found.

CHAPTER V.

Dinner was kept waiting for Mr. Barrett until nearly five o'clock. When the hour for serving it arrived and he had not returned, Mrs. Barrett and Nellie, neither one being hungry, agreed to wait for him; and after the waiting was begun and every next ten minutes was expected to bring him, it was easier to continue to wait than to take a decisive step in opposition to the hope that he would at any moment come. The March wind was blustering and scolding without, adding by its petulant gusts and peevish sighs to the perturbation of the ladies within.

"I wonder if they have discovered anything yet, mother?" Nellie queried over and over again. "I do wish father would come, or at least send us some message. Suspense is so awfully hard to endure."

Nellie tried earnestly to suppress her restlessness, but she found herself yielding to it in spite of all her efforts. Sunday in a little village where there is no religious service to attend is a tiresome day at best, and when there is anxious waiting united with the day's enforced inertia, it is a great trial to the patience of impulsive youth.

Had it been any other day in the week, Nellie would have cut out a dress or an apron for Stella, and in making the sewing machine wheels fly around merrily, drown out the sounds of the fretful wind or hold her thoughts in check. She was one of those energetic mortals who required employment to ensure repose of spirits, and she usually chose her work with reference to the mood she was in.

That Sunday she was totally at a loss what to do.

She tried to read and kept her eyes steadfastly upon the page, but every now and then the words would dance into a heap and from their confusion the landing platform, surrounded by water and scattered over with empty boxes as Mr. McStea had described it, would stare at her and defy her to forget it. She tried the piano and played and sang for an hour or more. The children came to her and asked her to read to them, and feeling sympathy for them in their loneliness, she did her best, that they at least would be entertained; but Virgil devoted so much attention toward catching an adventurous fly that had sallied from his winter quarters and was taking a view of the outside world from the window pane, and Stella occupied herself so assiduously in the equally fruitless task of making Virgil behave himself and let the stiff little pilgrim alone, that Nellie put the book down in disgust.

"Oh pshaw!" she cried, "you children are no more interested in listening than I am in reading! Come, let us make some candy."

Both children wheeled away from the window, all interest and enthusiasm, and Nellie gave her commands.

"Brother," she began, "you go to the china closet, and get the pecans, and sister, you look in the side-board drawer for the nutcrackers, while I get the cups and waiter. Come, mother, I know you want something to do, too."

The scheme was eminently successful. Every one cheered up, and the children flitted about their appointed tasks gaily. Soon all were seated around the chair that was to serve as table, ready to begin. Nellie picked up a nutcracker and held it up to give emphasis to her words.

"Now mind the rules," she began. "The first one who eats a pecan or a piece of pecan before we have

both cups full, will have to put a nickel in his charity-bank."

"Now, sister," Virgil protested, "that isn't fair! Let's eat a few before we begin, because I haven't had a one to-day."

"No, he must keep the rules, mustn't he, mother?"

There followed much banter and innocent laughter. As Nellie had suspected when she reminded them of their self-imposed penalty, Mrs. Barrett was the first one to forget herself and put a tempting piece of nut into her mouth. Virgil was on the alert, and shouted:

"Five cents for mother's bank, five cents for mother's bank!"

Mrs. Barrett laughed and promised to pay her dues, and not three minutes later she had the fun of catching Master Virgil. When the nuts were ready, the two little children followed Nellie into the kitchen and watched her melt the sugar, and stirring the pecans into it pour the whole upon a platter, a confection so delicious that they could scarcely wait for it to cool.

Just as Nellie bore the candy, ready to be eaten, through the dining room door into the hall, Mr. Barrett entered through the front door opposite. As Mrs. Barrett expected, several gentlemen came with him. Mr. Durieux and Mr. Wheeler from Englehart came as they usually did on Sunday, and Mr. Chaffin, the sometimes guest, was with him, too. Dinner was served immediately, and while all were at the table the day's adventures were recounted to the ladies and commented upon.

The Barrett residence is one of the largest and handsomest homes in the parish. It stands somewhat removed from the other houses in Sigma, by its large orchard and lawn, and it is the last house on the wide, well shaded street. Its pretty furnishings were chosen with regard to comfort in the first place, and with

beauty as essential but of secondary importance. Southern architecture provides consistencies for summer, and for the most part leaves chance to the consideration of winter's necessities. The large open fire place is never omitted, but neither is the wide gallery across the front of the house, and frequently entirely surrounding the edifice, shading both sides and rear, while the hall through the centre, measuring from eight to twenty feet in width, according to other proportions of the building, is considered of as much importance as the bed-rooms or dining-room itself. Ventilation in summer is the chief result aimed at, and when the few days of each winter come, that are cold enough to send the mercury to within twenty or ten degrees of zero, and the icy blast whistles through every crack around the great full length windows, the wood is piled higher upon the andirons and the merry blazes laugh at old Boreas up the wide throated chimney.

When dinner was over and the family and guests had returned to the sitting-room, Mr. Durieux declined the cigar Mr. Barrett offered him, crossed the room and took a chair near Miss Barrett, where under cover of conversation about an absent friend, he dropped his voice a little lower and asked :

"Have you an engagement for this evening, Miss Nellie?"

The girl looked up quickly and blushed guiltily. "No—a—that is, not till after dark."

"Will you ride with me, then?"

"Yes indeed, I should enjoy it. I have felt like a caged bird, all day."

"Thank you," said the young man, rising. "Shall I tell Allen to saddle your horse?"

"Yes, tell him, and I will soon be ready."

The two young people left the room together, she to don her riding habit, and he, who was almost as much

at home in the house as she, to go to the kitchen where he would most likely find the house-boy.

When Nellie re-entered the parlor ready for her saddle, she went up to Mrs. Barrett, as she sat talking to old Mr. Chaffin, and said :

"Mother, I am going riding with Mr. Durieux ; Mr. Chaffin will excuse me," she added, smiling upon that gentleman, and glancing at Mr. Wheeler, she said : "You will be here when I return." Both gentlemen arose as she spoke.

"No, thank you," said the younger. "I thought of calling on Miss Carrie, so will go there while Jules is riding."

"And I, too, must bid you adieu," said Mr. Chaffin. "It is a long ride to Willowburn for an old fellow like me, and I must be going."

Amid laughter and chat Nellie and Durieux withdrew from the rest, and were soon mounted and passing through the gate ; then, as was his habit when alone with the girl, he took up his favorite language and asked : "*Quelle route préférez vous pendre ?*"

Without speaking, Miss Barrett quickly turned her horse's head, and waved her hand to indicate the direction she meant to take. They rode rapidly at first, for as the girl said, she had felt like a prisoner all day, and it was a relief to her to feel her freedom. When she was with the manager of Englehart, Nellie was entirely at her ease, and talked or remained silent as the humor struck her. She had known him since the first day he came from New Orleans to Sigma, five years before, to clerk in her father's store at Englehart, and she, little thirteen year old school girl that she was, laughed at his strong French accent and his nerveful French jestures. She had long since, however, become accustomed to all three ; the man, his speech, and his manners, all of which had gradually modified with time and contact with the slower motioned North Louisianians.

When Jules Durieux first found himself amid strangers, his greatest longing for home was caused by his yearning for his beloved mother tongue.

There was only one French speaking man in the neighborhood, and he, a Parisian Jew, had been away from his native land so long that he could scarcely carry on the simplest conversation without recourse to an English word in almost every sentence. One day, however, Durieux coming to the house to see Mr. Barrett on business, chanced to hear Nellie's thoroughly American governess trying to teach the little girl how to read French, and involuntarily he broke into a hearty laugh, followed by an humble apology. The governess was a sensible young woman, fortunately for her young charge, as well as herself; and one to whom self improvement was a matter of constant consideration, so instead of feeling indignant at his laughter as Durieux feared she would, she joined in it, and asked him to tell her wherein lay her mistake.

"Simply in your pronunciation Miss," answered the young man, "which is really, if you will pardon me for saying so, ludicrous." Durieux spoke in his best French, and the lady simply stared at him for his pains. She understood the language thoroughly when it lay before her upon a printed page, or when haltingly spoken by her old teacher at college, but when it came to French from the tongue of a Frenchman, it was quite another thing, and Durieux disappointedly repeated what he had said, in English.

"Then, my dear sir," the quick-witted girl retorted, "in charity to me if not to Nellie, you must help me to rectify my pronunciation."

"Thanks," Durieux answered, "nothing could give me more pleasure than to assist you in every way in my power."

The enterprising governess lost no time in consulting

Mrs. Barrett about, what seemed to her, a golden opportunity, and it soon became an established rule that Mr. Durieux should come on certain evenings of each week to assist Miss Whitaker and Nellie with the language lesson, and from that time the three formed the habit of speaking French to each other that was retained by Nellie and Durieux after the governess was gone.

Today, neither Jules nor Nellie were in a talkative mood, and they swept on without conversation. Nellie had chosen the road toward Lilyditch, partly because she wanted to visit the scene of last night's robbery, but more because it was her favorite way. She loved the river in all its phases; when it was tremendous and powerful, as it was now, spreading a mile wide, or when it sulked deep within its banks, cowed and submissive. There was a little strain of character, too, in Nellie Barrett that loved adventure, and she pointed out the path on the top of the levee as a delightful place to feel that creepy thrill of fear, subjected to her own strength and courage, that is so fascinating to youth.

As they rode to the top of the levee, Durieux allowed the girl to precede him, knowing very well that if left to her own will, she would choose the side next the water. Her horse was sure footed, and he knew that she was a fearless rider. As soon as they were well on top of the embankment, Nellie started her horse again into a brisk gait; regardless of the possibility that a false step might send her and her horse head-long down the levee into the water on the one side, or failing this, rolling down the other slope into the road that was dark and slushy from the effects of water that had seeped through the embankment, and lay across the roadway and edges of the freshly plowed fields.

The vicious wind of the morning had ceased chopping the river's surface into rough waves, and dashing white caps, that broke against each other madly, and now the

flood of tawny water lay in its usual powerful silence. Where the water touched the levee's side in placid stillness, reflecting every tree and cloud that bent above it, there was no hint of the wonderful energy that out in the midst, was hurrying huge prostrate logs down the current.

The tender leaflets that were swelling upon every willow and cottonwood were too young to relieve the sombre coloring of the view, yet here and there the levee's slope was rejuvenated by patches of clover and delicate grass that had sprung above the brown ghosts of a former summer, and the peach trees clustered about the cabins dotting the fields, glowed pinkly with their beautiful blossoms.

The exercise and crisp river breezes made Miss Barrett's eyes sparkle and her cheeks flush. She was not a beauty, this fair young Louisianian, although her features were regular, and her brune-blonde coloring soft and dainty; yet there were very few who did not think her strikingly pretty. She was tall, and as erect as one of the slender stalks in her native cane-brake. Her eyes were blue, with long black lashes to veil them in thoughtfulness or frame them in interest or inquiry. Her most charming feature was her mouth; it was delicately moulded into flexible curves that could form into a smile as innocent as an infant's, and sometimes into lines as firm as chiseled marble. Her teeth were white and regular, and the whole, suggested a creation so pure, and so thoroughly wholesome as to strengthen one's faith in humanity involuntarily. It was just the mouth to receive tender reverent kisses, or to utter true womanly thoughts. With these attractions she possessed two others, that proclaimed her a native of the South; these two, were her melodious voice, and her ease of movement that seemed as the grace of a water nymph.

Perhaps one who looked upon her would have said that she was spoiled, or vain ; but if she was, she had a perfect right to be. For eleven years she was an only child and was loved and indulged as an only child is likely to be, and when Virgil came, and a year and a half later baby Stella, Mr. Barrett never allowed her to regret their share in parental affection. As the mother's time and sympathies were more and more absorbed in her babies, the father and Nellie seemed by mutual consent to drift all the closer to each other, and a congeniality developed that increased as the girl grew older, and became, with her bright intellect, daily more companionable. As to the latter charge, if it ever had been made, there was no reason why she should not be vain ; and it rather added to her merits that she was so little so ; for she had been flattered and praised since her earliest recollection, and now that she was a young lady, and a very interesting one at that, her share of compliments was in no wise decreased.

Jules Durieux came to Englehart to take the position of book-keeper and clerk, but his dislike for indoor employment, and his love for planting, gradually drew him from his desk out into the fields, where Mr. Barrett recognizing his talent, encouraged him to cultivate it, and the result was that in a year or two he had made his way from a subordinate clerk to manager of the plantation. He had a great deal to learn about his new work at first, for he had had to exchange his native fields of sugar cane for those of cotton, and the complicated sugar-house for the simple gin-house.

Durieux had lived all his life, except the years spent in a New Orleans university, at the old place on the shore of one of the many bays that cut the southern coast into generous scollops. His great-great-grandfather was one of the young men turned adrift, homeless, when Grand-Pré was laid in ashes. Perhaps he

was a friend of Gabriel's, or perhaps even, one of Evangeline's lovers; of this Jules had no proof, but he did know personally the gentleman who had told Evangeline's sad story to the poet and urged him to frame it fitly to be handed down to coming generations as a reminder of their pathetic coming to the land where "Garlands of Spanish moss and of mystic mistletoe flaunted." Durieux had often sat and thought of the unfortunate maiden beneath the branches of the same giant cedar that had spread in protection, high above the sleeping Evangeline as she lay dreaming of the lover she had come over such weary miles of land, and—"through net work of lakes and bayous to seek"—dreaming that her lover was near, when, in reality, he was drifting past her in the darkness, all unconscious of her presence.

Durieux' great-great-grandfather acquired wealth after he found a new home, and married one of the greatest French belles then reigning in infant New Orleans, and it was from this union of gold and patrician beauty that old Jules Durieux was descended; but the aristocratic father, and grandfather before him had lived in a style that befitted the sons of old Pierre Durieux and Heloise de la Boissoneau, and by the time Jules was old enough to realize what it meant, he understood that the once beautiful home, now needing repairs so badly, and the honored name he bore were very nearly all that he could rightfully call his own. Neither his great-great-grandfather's money nor his great-great-grandmother's beauty lasted until it reached his generation. In appearance he was like his race; a small man, active, graceful and dark, with a quick tongue and a ready wit spiced with a keen sense of the humor in life's ironies; and withal, imbued with that strong pride which is the aristocratic Franco-Americans most marked common characteristic.

Nellie liked Durieux thoroughly, He was just twice her age when she saw him first, and that thirteen years difference between them always made her conscious of a barrier that separated them somehow, yet, too, gave her a right to look up to him as she might have done to a brother much older than herself; and he, in turn, accustomed to treating her like a child, as he did when he first became acquainted with her and heard her recite her French lesson, did so often, even yet, and alternately teased her almost to the verge of tears, or showed her the difference due her young ladyhood; and she, taking all his moods as they came, stormed at him in impotent rage one day, or appealed to him for his opinion of her plans the next, and through it all, accepting his friendship as an assured fact and himself as a necessary family adjunct, she was as unconscious of her strong fondness for him as either Stella or Virgil were. Thirty-one always seems such a mature age to eighteen, too.

CHAPTER VI.

By the time Nellie and her escort dismounted from their ride the short day had almost closed, and the round moon was disputing possession with the transient twilight. The lamps were burning in the parlor, and the fire which had been allowed to die down during the day to a few coals, had had fresh wood heaped upon it, and the flames vied with each other as to which should throw the ruddiest light upon the group seated about the hearth. Miss Barrett went immediately to her room to exchange her riding habit for more suitable attire, and returning soon, together, Jules Durieux and the Barrett family went into the dining-room and seated themselves around the table, where supper was spread in true Sunday style. There was not a servant on the place, and the family ate the repast of cold roast, cold biscuit, preserves and milk, supplemented by hot coffee that Mrs. Barrett made on a little oil stove, with the freedom of congenial friends fearing no listening ear or repeating tongue of another social station.

No one was hungry, for their late dinner did not admit of it; but they went through the form of eating while in reality talking with far more interest.

There is no time so favorable for a charming untrammelled flow of reminiscences as the hour around the supper table, when the plates are pushed back, the napkins rolled away into their rings, and every one feeling at liberty to rest an elbow upon the board and lean forward to listen or explain. The hostess is entirely at her ease, knowing that no one is waiting to wash the used dishes or for the food that remains. The bright light in the centre of the board illumines

every face and the positions are such that each participant in the conversation is within hand clasp of every other one. The nearness of persons seems to engender the nearness of thought and makes the circle of wit more brilliant and complete.

While the Barretts' supper table was surrounded by its cheerful group, large and small, for Stella and Virgil took their part in what was being said and ventured an opinion or a narrative, here and there, there was a spectator without, watching the changing countenances of the happy group within. He could hear no word of what was being said, but the pantomime of bright faces and jestures was rhetorical with the enjoyment the words must be creating. The man stood on the front gallery and looked through the open hall door, on through the long hall and through the glass paneled door, with its curtains drawn aside, into the dining-room itself. No detail escaped his quick attention; he noticed the interested faces turned toward Mr. Barrett, who, with his back to the door, seemed to be telling one of the humorous stories of which he had an unending supply.

The man on the gallery saw that Jules Durieux was seated directly opposite Miss Barrett and that his eyes sought her pretty face oftener than they did any other object in the room. He saw Nellie look up and meet his glance with a frank smile and that little flash of her heavily fringed eyelids that was so charming, and unconsciously a frown puckered his handsome brow. He placed his hand upon the handle of the door-bell and almost lifted it high enough to cause the hammer to strike, then dropping his hand he muttered, half aloud:

"Too bad to break up their merry-making!"

Without hesitating again, he entered the hall, hung his hat upon one of the hooks of the handsome hat

rack, and went on toward the dining-room door, the carpet making his footfalls noiseless. Softly turning the knob of the glass paneled door, he threw it open and silently enjoyed the surprise his sudden appearance produced. Mrs. Barrett, who sat directly opposite the door, was the first to see him, and she exclaimed warmly :

"Dr. Allison! Come in, do. We are just finishing supper. Come and have something with us!"

Mr. Barrett arose and shook hands with the newcomer and invited him to take the seat that had been placed at the table for absent Mr. Wheeler, but before he accepted it, Dr. Allison thanked him and went first to shake hands with Mrs. Barrett. He stooped and kissed the expectant little faces of his two adorers, Stella and Virgil, and at last obtained a clasp of the soft pink hand that had drawn him over fourteen miles of rough road as easily as a powerful magnet can draw a small needle across an inch of space.

"I am not hungry, thank you, Mr. Barrett," averred young Allison as that gentleman urged him to partake of the roast and other food upon the table. "I had supper before I left home, and really can eat nothing more." He took the cup of coffee that Mrs. Barrett poured out for him, however, and the general conversation was resumed.

As Dr. Allison sipped his coffee and joined in the talking, he secretly wondered how long Mr. Durieux purposed staying beside the Barrett hearthstone. He saw no necessity for his lingering now that he had finished his supper, yet Durieux seemed to have a great deal to say and plenty of time in which to say it.

How long the group might have sat, oblivious of the flight of time, there is no knowing, if Stella had not unexpectedly lost consciousness and nodded her head almost into her plate. The little girl looked up in dis-

tress as the laugh went around and almost burst into tears, in her embarrassment, when she discerned that all eyes were mirthfully bent upon her. Mrs. Barrett helped her down from her chair, and led the two young folks off to bed, although she and Virgil both stoutly declared that they were not sleepy a bit.

As Mrs. Barrett, with a child at each side, passed by Nellie's chair she said in an undertone: "Leave the table as it is. I will come back and put everything away," but Nellie smiled and shook her head, and when Mr. Barrett led the way back to the parlor only Dr. Allison followed him. Durieux knew the ways of the house, and lingered to assist the girl in her duties. Gathering up the scraps, he fed the dog and cats, and returning, had the windows closed and the doors locked by the time Nellie finished putting away the dishes containing the remnants of the repast.

"Thank you, Mr. Durieux," she smiled, when all was done and Jules picked up the lamp. "Come now, we will join the others."

"No, I'm going."

"Why—" began Nellie, but Durieux' mischevious laugh and suggestive shrug stopped her.

"Ah!" he cried, flashing a teasing glance at her from his dark eyes. "No," he went on, more exasperatingly than ever, "I won't stay to bother *him*."

Nellie blushed hotly. Taking the lamp from his hand, she darted into her room, calling through her laughter as she slammed the door:

"Well then, good bye!"

When she reached the security of her own room, she put the lamp down and listened until she heard her tormentor open the parlor door and tell her father and Dr. Allison goodnight, and waited until she heard him go down the front steps; then she straightened her features as best she could and tried to powder out

her blushes, and with no further excuse for remaining away, she opened the parlor door and went in.

Shortly after her entrance, Mr. Barrett reluctantly betook himself to his own room and his papers. The children had been put to bed and Mrs. Barrett sat beside the lamp-table waiting for him to come, but when he entered, contrary to his habit, instead of sitting down to talk to her for a while, he picked up a paper, and apparently began reading.

Mrs. Barrett sighed softly as she watched her husband. In the twenty years of her married life, she had learned to read that handsome dignified face before her as readily as an open book; but strange, in all that time she had never learned to approach the reasoning power that lay behind it. Many a time desire had prompted her to assay persuasion or argument against her husband's inmost thoughts, but invariably his friendly smile disarmed her and her every idea that she had meant to issue upon his resolution deserted her ignominiously, leaving her helpless before the one intellect and will that she acknowledged overwhelmingly superior to her own. It had never surprised Mr. Barrett nor caused him to speculate upon the reason why his wife, who was an authority in her social circle and a quick and ready wit in debating with others, should never venture a second point of argument when conflicting with himself. He took her submission, always, as a foregone conclusion, and attributed her acquiescence to her habitual sweetness of temper. No doubt, too, there was a grain of old-fashioned vanity in his makeup which left no questioning of man's superior judgment.

Mrs. Barrett sighed again. There was absolutely nothing that she could say. She saw her husband's dislike for Dr. Allison, and saw how hard it was for him to conceal it. That one who was innately so

gentle, so charitable and so just, should take an aversion to another who seemed to possess these qualities in as marked a degree, was a matter of frequent reviewing on her part. Mr. Barrett was always courteous to this guest, but he never extended the same cordiality to him that he did to other young men who visited the house. His politeness was never absent, but it was always discernably perfunctory. They had never discussed the young man but once, and that was upon an occasion when Nellie had gone to a party with him. Miss Barrett had all the liberties of other girls in her choice of gentlemen friends, and her father seldom thought anything of her coming or going.

Mrs. Barrett was young and very pretty still, and liked to attend balls occasionally, for there she met friends from a distance who came for the same purpose as herself—to chat with acquaintances and perhaps dance a little; and whenever she intimated her intention to go, Mr. Barrett cheerfully accompanied her. Nellie's plans were never effected by her mother's. She always had an escort to every entertainment, and Mr. Barrett often did not know who her favored friend would be until the young gentleman selected drove up in his buggy and asked for her.

The first time Dr. Allison escorted Nellie to a dance, Mr. Barrett expressed his displeasure; Mrs. Barrett was surprised, and asked what objection there was to the young physician.

"Well, really," Mr. Barrett laughingly said, "I have no objection to the young man, except that I prefer for Nellie to see him as little as possible."

"Have you heard anything against his character?" next asked Mrs. Barrett.

"No, I have heard nothing against his character except that Sidney Carroll and Vincent Minor are his constant companions. We know nothing," went on

Mr. Barrett, "of him further than that he is in the employ of the Lauren's Land Company."

"He seems to me to be a very entertaining young man," Mrs. Barrett urged tentatively, "quite above the average intellectually, judging him by the brief conversations I have had with him. He is very handsome, too."

Mr. Barrett laughed shortly and frowned. "That last is his salient drawback to me," he said. "He is entirely too handsome and entertaining to an inexperienced girl like Nellie. Much too handsome—that is why I regret so much that he has ever been allowed to come to the house. We know absolutely nothing of him, and I do not consider him worthy of cultivation. These showy young men, brought up for the most part in college, usually have very little but their surface polish to recommend them. Think, my dear," he went on, with real concern in his voice, "think what a complication would result should our daughter fancy that she wanted to marry him?"

Mrs. Barrett laughed, but deep in her heart there sprang a misgiving. She had scarcely thought of Nellie as anything but a child, and as Mr. Barrett spoke there flashed the thought that she could rightly no longer regard her as such.

"Oh well," said Mrs. Barrett, trying to be reassuring, "I think you can safely put aside all fears of Nellie's entertaining such sentiments regarding him. She has never shown a preference for any one yet."

"Ah, but there is another side to the picture. Young Allison's salary is good, I understand, but you must acknowledge that it would be something in a man's favor to marry our daughter. It is this thought that makes me doubtful of any lover who may come. I do not want the child married for her money nor her social prestage. We don't know what sort of fellow this Allison is."

If her father doubted his estimate of Dr. Allison's character and motives, Nellie did not doubt her own. In the ten months of her acquaintance with him, she felt that she knew scarcely anyone better. True to that strange perversity that makes a child conceal the most important secrets of its life from a parent, Nellie had unconsciously begun to hide her interest in him, and as this grew, her involuntary diplomacy made her dissemble all the more jealously. That Mr. Durieux guessed the true quality of her friendship with Dr. Allison was embarrassing enough, but if her mother or father were to detect it, she would feel indeed like a culprit. To Nellie it seemed reprehensible in a girl if she showed a preference for a man who was not her affianced lover.

Dr. Allison paid her unending compliments just as all the others did, but she scorned to attach any interpretation to his words than that they were the amusement of a friend, and because she found them the most gratifying to her of all she received, she laughed them away all the more assiduously.

As a society man, Dr. Allison was a genius. He was graceful and pleasing in figure as well as in face, and had an abundance of small talk ever ready at his command to fill any emptiness that might occur in a conversation, and, added to this, he was an excellent listener. This last mentioned attraction was no doubt due to the fact that he was not a selfish man. He was willing that every one, as well as himself, should be happy in the little things of life that so often prove a burden to misunderstood humanity. No, he was not selfish, neither was he lazy; and he never begrudged doing a friend a favor, nor did he often neglect kindly attentions to a woman, whether she were handsome or homely, bewitching or a bore. Then, united with these virtues which were so profitable to him as a man

and as a physician, he had the talent of sympathy. If in social relations a tiresome old lady recounted the merits of her children or detailed her personal trials or triumphs, he never looked wearied, but gratified his persecutor with his apparent interest until he could escape honorably.

In his professional career, if it was his duty to cut a man's leg off and he felt no more compunction than in dividing so much beef, his patient never suspected him guilty of indifference, but ever afterwards regarded him with a tender gratitude as a man who could understand another's pain. A supersensitive conscience might declare such duplicity a sin, but there must be a clause somewhere in the Great Code making evasion of this nature, though seemingly against the ninth commandment, not only pardonable, but worthy of the angels' recognition. Superfluous flattery is always sinful, but that flattery which is neither more nor less than an absence of barbarity, and that acts like balm upon a heart hungry for sympathy, is a blessed virtue; blessed to him who possesses the nature too gentle to wound a fellow being, and blessed to him upon whom the soothing influence rests.

Qualities like these, taken together, and supplemented of course by the man's handsome face, with its peculiarly expressive yellowish eyes, were what made every woman who knew him love him. Whether the affection lavished upon him was maternal, fraternal, Platonic or erotic, it was there always to a greater or less degree.

CHAPTER VII.

Miss Barrett never doubted in the least that the estimate she had formulated of Dr. Allison's character was a correct one. After the first few times of meeting, when their interviews had consisted of the usual light chat and an adroit passage at arms, wherein compliments were the foils used and laughing repartee the cushions that made the thrusts ineffectual, he drifted into the habit of talking sensibly to her, eliciting her quaint, self-formed methods of reasoning that revealed a rather well-balanced mixture of womanly sagacity and child-like confidence in humanity.

While Mr. and Mrs. Barrett sat by the fire in another room, each silently thinking of the two young persons in the parlor, those two were enjoying themselves in a manner seemingly so innocent that only one deeply versed in the subtle science of courtship would have detected signs that were portentous.

Wooring is and always will be the most interesting form of warfare in the world. Often it proceeds along the lines which Dr. Allison had chosen to pursue, where no guile is used and the highest, purest sentiments are attacked. Often it is like a campaign involving a trio of countries; the besieging, the besieged and a disinterested spectator. The latter is generally the line of action pursued by the man who is not taking his initial taste of Eros' shafts, and who furthermore knows that the besieged is a fortress not subjected to its first bombardment. The general of the besieging empire opens the maneuver in attracting the attention of the empire to be captured by discharging a volley of small ammunition upon the unsuspecting third

kingdom, winning the esteem of the coveted empire by calling attention to the nobility and honesty of his purpose; showing forth unlimited reasons why the third party should capitulate. He calls upon the object of his cupidity for advice and arbitration, secretly sending out scouts in the meantime to discover every weak point in her citadel or to find where her strongest guns are pointed; then, suddenly wheeling his forces, with every power nerved to the attack bears down upon the empire he designed in the first instance to capture, and behold, the day is won. The besieged empire pulls down her colors, and the conqueror's flag floats proudly aloft.

Dr. Allison had brought some photographs to show Nellie, and, as he had often done before, he was talking to her of his mother and sisters. He sat in a comfortable rocking chair opposite the one she was in, and these were placed so that when each leaned back, as one is supposed to do in such chairs, their two young heads were quite half the distance of the room apart; but when he brought his handsome head forward, as he often did, to point out some particular feature of one of the photographs that she held in her lap, and she, in interest, leaned forward to examine the peculiarity he was describing, his eyes, that were more like splendid topazes than anything they could be likened to, looked up through their dusky fringes into soft blue eyes near enough to make them droop their fluttering white wings and hide tell-tale lights from view.

Nellie took up a picture—the one that to her possessed most interest of all, and looked at it closely again. It was the photograph of a still handsome woman of perhaps fifty, and she noticed in it a strong resemblance to the living face before her. Allison was pleased that she turned oftenest to this one and looked at it so intently.

"She was a great beauty in her youth," he said, "judging by the praises I hear from her friends who knew her then." He went on gaily: "And this reminds me of sister's and Mamie's constant source of annoyance. Both of the girls, as you can see by their pictures, are just as pretty as they need be, and they naturally like to have credit for what good looks they possess; so I suppose they have a right to feel indignant when some old friend of mother's meets them for the first time and exclaims in amazement: 'Sybil Allison's daughter—can this be Sybil's daughter! Why you don't look a bit like your mother—*she* was a beautiful girl!'"

Nellie laughed heartily at the inimitably funny way in which Allison mocked the voice and manner of his mother's tactless flatterers.

"The girls have heard this thing so often," he added, "that they almost run as soon as any one announces an old friend of mother's."

"Your sisters are pretty," Nellie commented, thoughtfully, taking up their likenesses again, "but they really do not look like your mother at all. There is not the strong resemblance in theirs that there is in your face to the picture." Nellie had no sooner uttered the words than their purport flashed upon her. She looked up hurriedly and meeting her caller's merry glance, she colored hotly.

"Thank you!" Allison said with sparkling eyes. "I shall write and tell the girls that one of us looks like mother, anyway."

Nellie laughed in spite of her vexation, and Allison, quick to see that she did not enjoy his joke, changed into seriousness, and said feelingly:

"Her beauty is not mother's only charm. She is without doubt the dearest, sweetest mother that ever lived. No one ever was to a boy what she has been to

me. She has sacrificed many a comfort that I might have an education and study father's profession." He was thoughtful for some moments, and then said: "That is why I am at Lauren's Station. It is a means to an end, and as such I must stick to it. I must help mother now, for she had to sell a good deal of her property to pay my university expenses."

"It is good of you to stay at Lauren's with that object in view," the girl said approvingly. "I often wonder if you are not dreadfully lonely out there."

Allison caught at Nellie's words delightedly. "She often wondered if he were not lonely." It would have been a dreary place, indeed, that would not have been made elysian by the knowledge that she often thought of him. His spirits rose, and he answered cheerily:

"Oh, it isn't such a bad place after all. Carroll, you know, with all his faults, is such a jolly, good-natured fellow, that he could entertain a mummy, much less one who is anxious to be amused. All three of us are fond of reading, and then there is the hunting and fishing. We hunt almost every day in the winter and fish throughout the lazy summer time."

"But how do you manage that? The winter is their busiest time and the summer yours—how do you keep each other company, then?"

"The days are long enough in summer for me to see all my patients and loaf too; and in cold weather, when there is scarcely any sickness, I help the boys in the store or on their books, and that lets one or both of them off for an hour or two with me. Then, one of my greatest pleasures is my regular letter from mother or one of the girls."

"The girls," interposed Nellie, quick to take advantage of him and wreak her vengeance upon him for his teasing of a few moments before, "'the girls,' always being understood to mean your sisters, of course."

"Now, I didn't expressly say so," laughed Allison, blushing slightly. "You see, I have several pretty cousins."

"Yes, I see," said Nellie demurely. "Tell me something of your cousins, too."

"Gladly," assented Allison, not to be outwitted, "and you will let me bring you their pictures to see also? There is one in particular whom I know you would like—just the happiest, best tempered girl you ever saw!"

Allison went on to describe the girl he was thinking of and to tell some of her bright sayings. He was in the midst of relating an account of one of the many pranks she delighted in playing, when the clock in the hall deliberately struck ten. Allison paused, glanced at Nellie with his head tilted to one side, and listened until the last stroke rang out; then, springing to his feet, he held out his hand and said dolefully:

"Good night!"

Nellie arose too, and placing her hand in his, laughingly asked:

"Won't you finish what you were saying?"

He shook his head solemnly. "No, this narrative is destined to be a serial."

Both laughed with the light-heartedness of well poised youth when stimulated by intercourse with the opposite sex, and Dr. Allison took his departure.

CHAPTER VIII.

"Mother, this is the last week in August, and you know you said we ought to put up some more preserves before the peaches are all gone."

"Yes," Mrs. Barrett answered, "I have been thinking about it, yet I really don't see what we are to do. All last week Lillie was sick, and now this is Tuesday, the tournament and ball are to take place one week from tomorrow; your dress is only just begun, and besides, there are the cakes to be made for the ball supper."

"Still," said Nellie, pausing for a moment to think, "the peaches cannot be put off any easier than the tournament. If we don't cook them within the next day or two, there will be none left to preserve. Couldn't you work on the dress by yourself today, and let me make the preserves?"

"Yes, I could, very well; but you must remember that you promised to go with Carrie and Ruth to see the Gun Club practice this evening."

"Yes, so I did," mused the girl, trying to map out a plan by which she could accomplish all that she wanted to do, within the limited space of time left to her. "Well," she finally concluded, "I will try to do it any way. I think I can be through with the fruit by five o'clock, and then can get ready quickly, and go with the girls to see the practice, too."

She arose from her place at the breakfast table, where she had lingered to talk to her mother, after the other members of the family had gone, and went cheerily to her room to clean it up and put everything to rights, by the time Allen should have gathered the peaches. Virgil and Stella caught sight of the young darkey as

he passed through the yard with step-ladder and baskets, and they ran to join him in the orchard to help him pick up the peaches, and meanwhile help themselves to all that they needed for individual purposes.

Virgil was under the impression that he was quite a man, himself. His seventh birthday had passed long ago, it seemed to him, and he was counting the months that must come before he would be eight. He was his father's only boy, and that knowledge carried great weight with it, united with the fact that he had been wearing trousers for almost four years. He and Stella were remarkably good children, and their devotion to each other was a sentiment that did one good to watch. No newly betrothed couple was ever so absorbed in each other's society, or more thoroughly soul-satisfying within itself than this little pair of individuals. When they were together the world was so filled that there was not room enough to admit of a third person comfortably. This oblivion of their contemporaries, leaving them solely to the companionship of each other, their parents and sister, made them unlike other children, inasmuch as their babyish ways were soon shed, and they assumed the thoughtful, reasoning habits of their elders. It was Virgil's delight to use the biggest words that his keen little memory could grasp, and Stella, making it her pride to do whatever "brozzer" did, the two had a command of the English language that would have done credit to a college youth. The parrot-like peculiarities of childhood had added a good deal of French, gleaned from Durieux' and Nellie's conversation, to their vocabulary too, and this acquirement they never tired of ventilating in Allen's and Lillie's presence for the servants' mystification. It was a source of annoyance to the children that the two household darkies spoke so incorrectly, and often the latter would exaggerate their pronunciation and choice of words for the fun of hearing

the rebuke and contemptuous correction that the young philologists were sure to administer.

By the time Nellie had her room adjusted into its accustomed neatness, Allen and the children returned from the orchard, bringing two large baskets full of fruit, which were deposited on the gallery extending along the dining-room and kitchen. As Nellie came out and inspected the peaches, Virgil graciously asked:

"Sister, do you want Stella and me to help you peel?"

Nellie smiled covertly. She had seen some of their fruit paring operations, and knew that the process as practiced by their small hands left very little more than the seed.

"No, thank you, I think I can manage with Lillie's assistance, but if I find that I need you, I shall call you."

"All right then. Come Stella, let's go see if my red cactus is open yet," and away the two little bundles of energy dashed, singing gaily as they went.

Nellie busied herself getting ready for her day's work. She was an expert preserve-maker and took great pride in the fine quality and flavor of her product.

"Allen," she said as she turned her sleeves back from her wrists, "go into my room and get my small rocking-chair, and Lillie, you bring me a waiter for the peelings, and also the preserve kettle. Mind now, that you have it perfectly clean."

Nellie went into the dining-room for a knife, and the two darkies hastened to do her bidding; when she returned, the chair and other things awaited her. She seated herself and directed Allen to place a basket of peaches on a low box beside her, that she could reach the fruit without trouble, and spreading her big check apron carefully over her pretty white morning dress, she began her monotonous cutting.

"Come Lillie," she called, "come and help me get the peaches ready, and Allen can finish washing up the breakfast things."

Lillie came, cheerful and smiling, always, and seated herself upon a box near one of the baskets. She was very little older than Miss Barrett, and she looked up to that young lady as a paragon of beauty and perfection. Lillie could hardly recollect a time when she had not "been around white folks." She had changed homes with the habitual restlessness of her race, but she was so well satisfied with her home at the Barretts, that she had announced her intention to remain with the family as long as she lived. She was a fine type of healthy youth, with a complexion dark and glossy as sealskin. She had wide-awake black eyes and thick pinkish grey lips that seldom closed over her white teeth unless there was absolutely no one available to talk to.

Nellie had never seen the colored girl angry in all the time she had known her, nor ever worried about anything, great or small, except upon the occasion when her little child had an attack of fever, accompanied by convulsions. If Lillie regarded Nellie as the quintessence of perfection generally, Nellie in return, considered her the personification of amiability.

The light-hearted colored girl not only never got angry herself, but she never allowed anyone to become angry with her. Her's was always the soft answer that turned away wrath, and sent Mrs. Barrett away relenting, no matter how flagrantly untidy the kitchen was found, nor even if one of her finest napkins had been used as a hastily improvised dish-rag.

Lillie never did seem to have meant to do wrong, and her patience and humility were such salient characteristics that her short-comings and sins of omission seemed pardonable, simply because they were hers.

Like every member of her race, Lillie was a lively talker, loving to give voice to her ideas better than almost anything else on earth, and if Nellie would but listen to her sometimes, her happiness seemed complete.

She had no sooner seated herself and picked up a knife and a peach, than for want of something more original to say, she exclaimed:

"My, but ain't these peaches fine! They reminds me of when I used to stay at Mis' Belle's. She had the biggest kind of a orchard, but she never had no such fruit as this here."

Nellie paid no attention to what Lillie was saying, and for some time both applied themselves silently.

"Miss Nellie," asked the girl, "why don'd you make Allen peel some of these peaches; he can finish what little cleanin' up there is while they's on boiling? Allen, you Allen!" she called before Nellie had time to state her wishes in the case one way or another. "Allen, Miss Nellie wants you!"

Allen came forward and Nellie without appearing to notice the colored girl's little *ruse*, gave her commands:

"Take some of the peaches to the kitchen, Allen, and peel them; I am in the biggest kind of hurry, and want to get them on the stove."

Allen did as he was told, and Lillie tried again to attract Nellie's attention, but the young lady had her own pleasant reflections for entertainment that crowded out recognition of her loquacious admirer, and there was silence for half an hour. Silence, if nature's bedlam of sounds can be called by that term. Bees were droning over their work in the great Marechal Neil rose that covered the outer side of the gallery; an energetic hen, accompanied by her brood was discussing the palatable morsels obtained by the interesting exertion of a well-directed scratch; a few lazy mosquitoes were dreamily practicing their crescendos, and a saucy

fly with a hateful buzz, persisted in descending upon Nellie's hand; a bob-white was calling to his mate down by the bayou; a mocking-bird in the mimosa tree was carolling with all his might, and a redbird called his "Theodore" merrily, despite the widowed dove in the distant canebrake, who moaned out his aching heart. There was silence, if this be it, but where is silence between the hours of dawn and midnight in this land of bird and insect life, where each is blessed with vocal sounds to express the joy of living?

Nellie's thoughts were suddenly brought back to the present moment by an outburst from Lillie.

"Well sir! What you reckon 's up now?" She dropped her voice a little lower and went on. "What do that nigger want around here, I wonder?"

Nellie looked up and wondered too. At the back gate, a young colored man was dismounting from a fine, well groomed horse, and preparing to hitch the animal to the fence. As the man advanced, it was seen that his person was as well cared for as his steed. His clothing was neat and well fitting, and revealed a spotless shirt-front and collar, ornamented with a pretty four-in-hand tie. He carried a small satchel swinging from his shoulder by a strap of a dark tan hue that matched his complexion harmoniously. As he drew nearer, Nellie recognized him as the son of a very well-to-do, and highly esteemed negro of the neighborhood. She had never spoken to the young man except in returning his courteous salute in passing on the road, nor had she ever heard his first name mentioned, that she could recall, and she was somewhat curious to know his reasons for coming to the house.

As the darkey came up the steps, he lifted his hat and bowed with a grace that would have sat well upon a man of more pretentious rearing, then hesitated, stroking his short curly moustache unconsciously, in

his partial embarrassment. Nellie waited a moment for him to speak and asked kindly :

"Do you wish to see my father, Bishop—I believe your name is Bishop, isn't it?"

"Yes'm, Bishop is my name—Junius Bishop," he returned, bowing low again. "No'm, I doesn't wish to see Mr. Barrett, Miss. I have called on the contents of showing you a attachment for a sewin' machine, mam, that is pronounced a great assistance in the runnin' of the machine, makin' it much more—a—easier for to propel."

Nellie did not speak, and he went on in the same pompous strain.

"I am the onliest one in this neighborhood—a—representin' the agency, and I would like very much to showit to you or to Mrs. Barrett—a—because I feels very concious, mam, that you will want to purchase one when you sees how much lighter it makes the machine run." He stroked his moustache again and looked inquiringly at the young lady.

"Well, you see, Bishop, I am very busy this morning, and really have no time to spare."

"Yes'm, I observe you is, but if you could give me a few moments of your valuable time,—it wouldn't take me long to show it."

Nellie looked keenly at the darkey to see if his allusion to her 'valuable time' was meant as sarcasm, but although he was evidently filled with the consciouness of his own importance, his demeanor was respectful, and she allowed him the the benefit of the doubt.

"A good many of the white ladies," Bishop resumed, "has tried 'em, and they all indorses 'em as bein' a great improvement. Won't you let me show you how you manipulates it?"

Nellie was amused, and little vexed too. The darkey's way of speaking was so patronizing that it was ludi-

crous while it irritated, and she hesitated between her resentment at his manners, and her curiosity in this hitherto untried interview with colored aristocracy. Her first thought was to send him about his business, as she felt his half-impudence merited, but his self esteem was so evident that it became contagious, and finally old mother Eve's distinguishing characteristic prevailed. She, who had lived in contact with negroes from the time when her black nurse rocked her to sleep in her arms, up to the present time, had never before seen a negro in the capacity of "agent." She had bought many articles from many negroes, such as pecans, persimmons, birds and berries; but those who brought things to sell, never came with so much display of erudition and fashion as this salesman before her. She knew that young Bishop was a school teacher on one of the large plantations near, and that knowledge whetted her interest in the fellow's pretentions.

Nellie arose and smiled as she caught herself instinctively taking off her work-apron. As Bishop saw that Miss Barrett meant to let him show her his goods, he laid his derby, which he had been holding in his hand while he talked, upon the floor, and took the satchel from his shoulder.

Nellie led the way into Mrs. Barrett's room, to the machine, and rather enjoyed her mother's surprise at seeing the young "collud gentman" ushered into her presence. Mrs. Barrett was sitting near the bed surrounded by the confusion of silk and pleated chiffon that she was converting into a ball dress for Nellie.

"Mother, this is Junius Bishop. He wishes to show us a sewing machine attachment that he has taken the agency for."

Nellie announced his entrance with so much seriousness that Bishop's figure increased preceptibly, and his manner became more dignified and gracious than be-

fore. Mrs. Barrett nodded pleasantly, and Junius again displayed his Chesterfieldian accomplishments. He took his implements from his satchel and proceeded to adjust the spring he wished to sell, to the sewing machine standing near an open window.

Nellie was watching his movements and listening to his incessant flow of explanations when she heard a stifled giggle behind her, and turned around to find Lillie standing there beaming with delighted curiosity. Nellie frowned to make her stop laughing, and the girl hastily quitted the room to avoid an open explosion of mirth. Lillie could not deny herself, however, the pleasure of seeing what was going on, and as soon as she could finish telling Allen what "that dude nigger" was doing, she returned with a painfully sobered countenance, and wisely avoided meeting her young mistress' eye again. Bishop ignored the brunette's presence as entirely as he did the kitten on the rug, and continued extoling the merits of his wares.

"You see now, mam, that's the way you adjusses it. Then you starts the machine—a—and when the wheel begins to revolutin' good, it takes very much less zertion—a—for to propel the machine—a—don't you know? All you has to do is to press down with the heel and the attachment draws it up again itself." Bishop emphasized his sentences with elaborate jestures and frequent little affected gasps, which augmented his patronizing tones almost beyond Nellie's endurance; causing her to battle inwardly between her risibles and resentment.

"Won't you please—a—just try it yourself now, Miss?"

"Get me a chair, Lillie." Lillie placed a chair before the machine, and Nellie, seating herself, started the wheels to running.

"Doesn't you find it a great improvement, Miss Barrett?" questioned the agent.

"Well really, I do not detect any difference at all, scarcely."

Bishop stepped back and assumed a pose of extreme surprise. "Why! I am astonished! All the white ladies who has tried 'em pronounces 'em a *great* advantage."

Nellie arose from her chair, concealing her indignation. It was something of a novelty to her to have her veracity questioned, much less to have it doubted by a pompous negro.

"You can take the attachment off," she said tersely. "I cannot waste any more time."

Bishop looked at her in helpless disappointment, and her heart softened. Perhaps, after all, she reflected, he had not meant to be impertinent. She watched him as he slowly began to unscrew the affair, his prolific tongue silent at last.

"Mother, shall we let him leave it on?"

"Just as you wish about it; how much does it cost?"

"Only fifty cents, Madam," bowed Junius, his face brightening.

"Leave it on then, I will take it." Nellie procured the necessary amount, and handed it to him.

CHAPTER IX.

Nellie returned immediately to her work, followed by Lillie, and as soon as young Bishop and his handsome horse were out of sight the colored girl's broad smiles defied all further suppression and burst into a paroxysm of giggling.

"What is that boy goin' to git at next, I wonder!" she exclaimed in the midst of her mirth. "Looks like he can think of more things to git into than the law allows. All last year he was peddlin' books—good books too, what I got to leave with you, and when his school closed he got him a picture tent and went to drawin' folkses pictures."

"How did he draw pictures?"

"Oh, he had a regular cameo—one of them boxes what you look through."

"Were his pictures good?"

"Well, yes'm," said Lillie meditatively. "They looked like you, but they was too dark. He couldn't make no kind 'ceptin' them tin pictures, you know."

Lillie lost herself in retrospection for a few moments and worked on industriously all the while, but she could not restrain herself long at a time and soon took up giggling again, followed by more chatter.

"Miss Nellie, you'd a died laughin' if you had been at the picnic last—no, twas Sat'day before last—at the picnic what Junius' pa gave. I never had so much fun before in all my life. Me and Allen both was tickled," she laughed at the recollection. "You see, most all these here girls is trying to set up to Junius 'cause his pa's rich; but there was two girls in particular, the 'two Annies' we calls 'em, what made theirselves plumb

redicalus about him. 'Twas Anna Wells and Anna White." Lillie had to stop to laugh and then continued talking, with her habitual ripple of laughter throughout what she said. "Yes sir! the two Annies they just tried theyselves courtin' Junius through his little sister Blanchie. You know Junius got a sister about ten years old, and her ma had her at the picnic, dressed fit to kill, in white organdy trimmed up in lace and pink ribbons. Oh, she had on a 'dike' I tell you, and she looked nice, too; and first Annie White would take Blanchie up and treat her to lemonade, and then Annie Wells would carry her off and buy her ice cream and cake. I tell you, Blanchie had a good time once in her life, but its a wonder they didn't kill her."

Nellie heard a smothered echo of Lillie's laughter in the direction of the kitchen, and knew that Allen was there, an interested listener.

"Yes sir, I tell you, Blanchie was 'in town'! Miss Nellie, did you ever see Bishop's wife?"

"No. Watch out there, Lillie, you left some peeling on that peach you just dropped. You must be careful."

"Yes'm, I will." Lillie attended to the peach in question and went on talking. "She sho is a lucky woman. She's been had two rich husband's now. She had a husband over in Mississippi what was *well* to do, and he died and then she come over here and married David Bishop. Her first husband had a store over near Rockville."

"Get me another pan, Lillie, this is too full."

Going for the other pan did not break the thread of Miss Alexander's reminiscences. As soon as she was again seated she resumed. "Dave Bishop is a good man, too."

"Yes," assented Nellie, "I hear every one speak highly of him. He has nice manners, too."

"He sho has. He ain't biggity with 'em either. He

don't put on a bit of airs—nothing like what his son does." Lillie went off into a fit of laughing at recollections of the agent's pompousness.

"His son is young yet, and will most likely settle down and be more sensible as he grows older."

"Well, I trust so. His pa treats everybody well, rich and poor alike, that's why people likes to work for him. He's got people with him now what's been his hands seven years. My Lawd, when Bishop rented Erin plantation all by hisself, the people just crowded there so he had to turn some of 'em off. They got to liking him when he lived on Captain Barringer's place and helped him to manage."

There was a restful pause.

"We are almost done now, Lillie. I'll leave you to finish while I begin to weigh the fruit and sugar." Nellie began to clean the stain, left by the action of the acid and steel, from her fingers with the fleshy side of a piece of peach skin, and Lillie embraced the chance left by the few moments in sight.

"Bishop's goin' to give another picnic Sat'day after next, and is goin' to have his flyin' horses and a band of music, same as usual."

Nellie laughed. "And 'same as usual' you want to go, and leave us to make out on a cold dinner."

"Now, Miss Nellie—" protested the girl deprecatingly. "I pintedly does want to go, sho; but I'm scared Mrs. Barrett wouldn't let me off two Sat'days in one month. I was studyin' 'bout I could get an early dinner if she didn't mind, and have all the fun I want at the picnic too. That ain't what's troublin' me, though," Lillie giggled. "What I wants is I wants your blue challie to wear to it—the one you said you might be willin' to sell."

Nellie picked up one of the pans. "Oh, that's it, is it? Well, we'll discuss that later," she laughed, mov-

ing towards the pantry door. She had only gone a few steps though, when her progress was arrested by another one of her serving-maid's sudden outbursts of surprise.

"Well, sir! Now who all is this?"

Nellie turned and saw the figure of a second dismounting darkey, differing in personal appearance from the other as much as two animals of the same genus well could. When he had hitched his mule to the fence, he opened the back gate and sauntered in, swinging his hands idly at his sides. Reaching the edge of the gallery, he stopped short, and clutching his shapeless old hat by the top, he held it long enough to withdraw his head, nod, and thrust it into its covering again; then, with the same hand, he deftly drew a note from his left sleeve and extended it toward Lillie. Lillie put her knife and pan down and walked to the edge of the gallery where the man had deposited his arm with an air of entire repose that would have done Delsarte's heart good to behold. She took the note gingerly by one corner, so as not to soil it with her juicy fingers and carried it to the young lady for whom it was intended.

Nellie placed her pan on a table and opened the missive, a little fine line forming between her eye-brows, and growing deeper as she read. She read it through twice, then returned it to its envelope, and started toward her room, pausing in the hall door long enough to say to its bearer:

"Wait."

Instead of going straight to her own room, however, she went first to her mother's and handed the note to her, sinking into a chair near by to wait until she had read it. It took Mrs. Barrett but a moment to learn the contents of the brief communication, and she looked up inquiringly; but she failed to meet her

daughter's eyes, for Nellie had her head bent forward, and was thoughtfully gathering the hem of her apron into a ruffle with a pin.

"Have you answered it?"

Nellie laughed shortly. "No'm, not yet."

"You will accept, I suppose," Mrs. Barrett said indifferently, as though dismissing an unimportant matter, but she clearly saw that something was wrong.

"Don't you want to go with him?"

"Ye-es," drawled Nellie, "I guess I would as soon go with him as with any one else; but—"

"But what?"

Nellie laughed again and blushed rosily. "Oh, nothing. Only I wish he hadn't asked me so soon."

"Soon, why you almost always receive offers of escort as soon as the invitations are issued."

Nellie was silent for a while. "It's too bad that a girl can't get all her offers at one time, and then take her choice," she exclaimed ruefully,

Mrs. Barrett laughed. "Um, there's the rub, is it?"

"Mother, what would you do in my place?" asked Nellie seriously.

"Well," deliberated Mrs. Barrett mockingly, "you see, this is a very weighty matter—"

"Oh mother! What makes you always ready to tease me? Whenever I come to you like this, you always turn everything into a joke."

The girl's sensitive nature was wounded almost to the verge of tears, and as usual she proudly choked them back and shrank behind a shield of indifference. Mrs. Barrett was trying the effect of a certain waist decoration, and scarcely noticed when Nellie took the note up from where she had allowed it to slip from her lap to the floor, and went into her own room to answer it.

As soon as Nellie settled the question by replying to

Jules Durieux in the affirmative, she again hastened back to the regions of the kitchen and becoming absorbed in watching the contents of her kettles, she dismissed the matter from her mind.

In the afternoon, when the preserves were cooked to perfection and Nellie was filling the last jar with the scalding stuff, a third negro rode up to the back gate and another note was given to Lillie. Lillie was so accustomed to handling notes that passed from messengers to her young mistress that she thought nothing of the fact, except to boast to the other servants of the neighborhood of how much attention her Miss Nellie had and how often she had more company than she knew what to do with.

This time the penmanship upon the envelope brought a deeper glow into Nellie's cheeks than even the heat of the stove had done, and a brighter light shown in her sweet blue eyes.

"Lay the note there, Lillie, and tell the man he must wait," she said. "I can't stop now." She screwed the last top upon its jar carefully; set the hot thing on the table with its mates, and then read her note. As before, she took the note to her mother and offered it to her, unfolded, saying with a tinge of defiance:

"Now, you see?"

Mrs. Barrett folded the sheet and handed it back gently.

"Oh well, dear," she said soothingly, "what does it matter. You will enjoy yourself quite as well with Mr. Durieux, and really I did not think that Dr. Allison would undertake to come for you, when it is more than twice as far from Lauren's to Asola by way of Sigma than it is through by the railroad. It looks unreasonable," she went on, "for a man to go to a ball by a road twenty-two miles long, when he can get there by one only eight."

Nellie had her doubts as to Mr. Durieux proving as interesting an escort as Dr. Allison, and as for the distance to be gone over, youth seldom reflects upon the unreasonableness of a plan when pleasure is the stake played for; still, there was nothing for her to do now but to write an answer to Dr. Allison and tell him that a previous engagement prevented her accompanying him to the grand tournament and ball at Asola on the 6th.

There was a big crumb of comfort left her, even in her disappointment, and this stimulated her delightfully. Dr. Allison's note was dated "Sigma, August 29th, 3 P. M." and this was as good an announcement as if a courier had proclaimed upon a brazen trumpet that Dr. Allison was in her vicinity and would see her in a few hours where the Gun Club met to practice.

Nellie had plenty of time after she finished preserving, to rest a quarter of an hour and then dress for the engagement she had made with her two girl friends.

Ruth and Carrie did not wait for the Barrett carriage to be sent for them, but came around to Nellie's as soon as they were ready, and sat in Mrs. Barrett's room, talking of the all absorbing topics, the tournament, the ball, and their respective dresses, while Nellie put on her hat and gloves.

The two girls had gone into raptures over the materials for Nellie's toilette, and Ruth was exclaiming for the fourth time that she knew it would be the loveliest thing in the house that night, when Virgil and Stella dashed into the room in a whirl of laughter, stumbling against each other as they came and finally throwing themselves down upon the floor in an abandonment of mirth. Every one in the room laughed in sympathy with the two little chaps, and Carrie, who was nearest to Stella, caught her up in her arms and kissed her.

"Do tell us what's so funny," she cried, "and then we can laugh too."

"Oh, we can't!" declared Virgil. "We promised Lillie not to give her away, didn't we sister Stella?"

"What on earth is Lillie up to now!" demanded Nellie, tying her veil.

"Stella, let's tell?"

"But Birg, we promised not to."

"Well now, you know she didn't mean we shouldn't tell mother," he said persuasively.

Both children laughed again and the girls fell to coaxing their secret from them.

"Now, if I tell," began the boy, "you must promise not to give Lillie away?"

"All right, we won't," the three promised.

Virgil jumped to his feet and shoved his hands down in his pockets. He hesitated, glanced at Stella, who clapped her hands over her mouth to keep from laughing; after laughing again himself, he began:

"Well, you know old Unc' Bednigo always brings his bucket along when he comes here to help Allen work in the garden—"

—"To take some of his dinner back to de chillun," interrupted Stell, giggling.

—"And after he had eatin' his dinner, and put his bucket on the shelf where he could get it when he's ready to go home, Lillie slipped it, and emptied all he had saved, out—"

—"And put a *bick-bat*, wapped in paper, in it!" chimed Stella, clapping hands and dancing about.

"What you reckon Unc' Bednigo is going to think when he gets home and looks into his bucket?" chuckled the boy, cutting a pigeon-wing.

"Lillie says she bets he'll want to whip her," said Stella with a mischievous smile.

"Well, I think he ought," laughed Nellie. "That

was a real mean trick of Lillie's, and I am surprised that you and brother would back her in any such badness."

Stella tucked her head and tittered, but Virgil ruffled up like an insulted chicken and retorted:

"Lillie was right. She said she'd teach old Unc' Bed a lesson about packin' off so much. She says Unc' Bed carries off most enough grub to feed two niggers, and she's tired of it, too! Why sister, if she don't hide her dinner till she's ready to eat it, he slips more than half of it into his bucket as soon as her back is turned! Lillie says our cats and dog get mighty few scraps when he's working 'round the place, and she's going to put a stop to it."

Virgil's eyes had grown large and dark with excitement, and his face showed a determination to justify his favorite in her actions.

"I suspect Virgil is about right," said Mrs. Barrett, looking up fondly at her son, "Yet I am afraid Lillie is not always as considerate of the cats and dogs as she is today. I shouldn't be surprised if 'Miss Alexander's' beaux and that boy of hers did not prompt her to play the prank on old Bedingo, as much as anything else."

All laughed, and the girls being ready, they left Mrs. Barrett and the children to further discuss Lillie's consideration of their interests, and betook themselves to the surrey.

Nellie declined Allen's services as driver, much to his disappointment, for he would have enjoyed seeing the Gun Club practice, quite as much as any one, and had hoped that he might go, from the time he was told to get the carriage ready.

The three girls got in, two on the back seat and Nellie in front, to drive. The sun was trying to see how hot it could be, it seemed, and the girls were glad enough to reach the end of their short drive and draw

up in the shade of the big pecan tree, where two or three buggies and several horses were already standing.

It was the same pecan tree near the river's bank that had afforded a perch for the happy mocking-bird the night of the landing robbery, and the wide band about its bole, paler in hue than the rest of its bark, showed how high the river had lapped its sides when spring floods were forcing their passage-way to the gulf.

The pigeon traps were set a short way from the tree, and nearer to the edge of the bank, bluff and almost perpendicular to the low murky water at its foot. The girls saw very little of the shooting that was done immediately after their arrival, for that time was taken up in exchanging greetings with the gentlemen who came up to the surrey. Dr. Allison was among the first to shake hands with them. He saw a golden opportunity awaiting some enterprising young man as soon as the surrey appeared pulling its way over the ramp in the levee, and Nellie had scarcely said "whoa," beneath the wide branches of the tree, before he swung himself into the vacant seat by her side, and taking the lines from her hands, said:

"Let me hold them for you Miss Nellie; the shooting might make the horse nervous and restless."

The girl smilingly assented. The arrangement suited her very well, although she was not apprehensive of any unseemly conduct upon the part of her span. There was too much phlegmatic fat between Topsy's and Toddie's glossy bay coats and their nerves to admit of the latter being easily reached. She knew that the horses would each set one hip bone higher than the other, and slouching against the harness, doze contentedly until the small, firm hand of their mistress gave them intimation that they might start homeward, and supperward.

There was a full attendance of the Gun Club that

afternoon. There were to be but two more days for practicing between then and the day of the tournament, when the final match was to come off, and Nellie felt very much interested in the result of the day's score. Her father purposed enlisting in the contest, and it was a great pleasure to her to watch how true his aim was, and how steady his arm. He was never taken by surprise, no matter in which direction the "pigeons" or "blue rocks" were tossed, and never before shot better than he did that afternoon.

Several of her young men friends remonstrated with Nellie for the marked partiality she showed her father's cause, and begged a transfer of her patronage to one of themselves, but she only refused in each case.

"No indeed," she would say, "Father's going to win the day at the tournament. You just wait and see! Won't you father?" she cried as Mr. Barrett came up to where she sat.

"Oh Nell," exclaimed Carrie when the men were about to put away the traps, "wouldn't you love to try to shoot at those little saucer-things?"

"Do you really want to try?" Mr. Barrett asked, looking at the girl's sparkling face.

"Yes indeed! Nell, do beg your papa to let us try."

"Father won't need begging if he thinks it right," the loyal girl responded, with a fond glance at her handsome parent, and the result of it was, that our three girls and several from the other carriages arrayed themselves nearer the traps, and each who was brave enough to do so, assayed a shot at the swiftly flitting "saucers."

When it was Nellie's turn to try, her father directed her attentively, then called for the spring to be touched; just as the blue rock sailed off gracefully, her trembling finger pulled the trigger, and the "bird" fell, a shower of fragments, amid a shout of applause.

"Hurrah for Miss Nellie! Try it again! Set the

trap for Miss Nellie!" came from all sides, but they called in vain.

"No indeed," she declared; flushed and laughing. "I have won my laurels, and can't afford to lose them in the same day!"

Some of the older men had gone homeward, but as the sun was not yet down, the young people gathered on the edge of the bank, and practiced shooting at sticks thrown into the river, until twilight, that loveliest part of the day, warned them to go home, too.

Nellie had often fired a pistol, and was a pretty good shot, as was one or two of the other girls, Carrie, especially, and Carrie was still secretly wondering why she had failed to break her pigeon, when she could hit the sticks floating on the water in almost every instance.

When Nellie and her friends returned to the surrey, Dr. Allison insisted that he should drive for her, saying he knew her to be too elated over her success as a marksman to safely entrust with the lives of the others, and Durieux seeing Allison's intention, crowded himself on the back seat to take care of Ruth and Carrie, for he vowed Allison knew nothing in the world about driving anything more spirited than a plow mule.

As Jules entered the carriage he called to Arthur Wheeler: "Take my horse, old man, and hitch him at Miss Ruth's gate.

Mr. Wheeler did as he was bade, and not long after that, his own horse was seen standing at the gate that little Carrie passed through oftenest.

CHAPTER X.

The morning of the tournament dawned at last, and as the sun reached high enough to peep over the rose lattice at Nellie's window and send a shaft of gilt across the foot of her bed, she awoke. For a few moments she laid thinking joyously of the happy hours awaiting her. She heard Lillie in the distance call to Allen to bring her some stove wood, and she jumped up, dreading that she had overslept herself when there was so much to be done. She opened her window and studied the signs to see what the weather would be. The sky spread above like a great blue porcelain dome with a crumpled bride's veil drifting here and there, and suggesting, as bridal veils should, only smiles and bliss.

When fully assured that there was nothing to fear from the elements above to mar the success of the day, Nellie hurried to the kitchen to make further investigations.

She found Lillie at her post, with the leg of mutton roasting in the oven, and the chickens in a pot on the stove boiling at full speed, while breakfast was in course of progress.

When the committee of arrangements sent their list of desired edibles out for contributions, Mrs. Barrett, with her usual liberality on such occasions, wrote down her name opposite "4 cakes, 2 gals. chicken salad, and 1 leg mutton," and now, the cakes were ready on the pantry shelf, white and delicious, the roast was fairly under way, and the salad only had to be made.

Breakfast was soon dispatched, the housework hastily done, and by eleven o'clock every one was ready for

the greatest frolic of the year. Virgil and Stella were dressed and waiting with their hats on, and for half an hour had been restlessly walking back and forth between their mother's room, Nellie's, and the kitchen; then out to the front gate to watch the passage of pleasure seekers on the way to Asola. Over and over they wondered how long it would be before they, too, could get started. The surrey stood waiting for them at the gate, and Mr. Durieux' buggy was hitched at the rack just behind it, while the little wagon, containing Lillie, Allen, the contribution to the supper and the trunk of ball attire, had been gone for some time.

All things come to an end, however, even children's waiting; and finally Mr. Barrett closed and locked the front door behind them and Virgil realized with a whoop and an extra caper of his heels, that they were really, at last, upon the point of starting.

Nellie looked as dainty as a field morning glory as she walked across the rich green lawn to get into the buggy. She wore a soft white muslin, with a wide white hat shading her face with its rolling brim. A cluster of La France roses nestled amid the lace near her rivaling cheeks.

The road was in excellent condition; hard and level, with but little dust, for the June rains, which had forgotten dates and lingered into July, had kept them muddy until very recently, and the buggy and surrey could keep close together. They overtook the little wagon before they were half way to Asola, and soon left it in the rear.

If the young couple in the buggy were enjoying themselves in anticipation of the pleasures in store, they had no advantage over the young couple in the wagon. Indeed it would have been hard to tell which of the two girls, the white or the black, was in the more delightful whirl of excitement. Both were look-

ing forward to the different methods they would employ in drawing upon the day's stock of events. Both would see, be seen, and hear, for there would be swains of the colored race there too, in the capacity of waiters, valets and hostlers, as eager to say soft nothings into dusky ears as there would be others of a higher rank in the rooms higher in the house of entertainment.

Lillie was perched on the seat beside Allen, dressed in her very best and tossing her head with a daintier air than that which sat upon her in Mrs. Barrett's kitchen. She knew she was assuming affectations, but she always donned them simultaneously with her nice dress, and she was rather proud of herself for her ambition to do so. These mannerisms vanished in the presence of white folks like dew-drops on a hot stove lid, but there was no reason, that Lillie knew of, why they should not be used to dazzle her associates.

She had sprung out of bed when the first tap of the nearest plantation bell rang out upon the moist morning air, and lighting a lamp to see how to find her clothes she hurried into them; running from her house to the kitchen, she had her fire started and her preparations well under way before Allen sleepily dragged himself out of his own room. She had not seated herself from the time she buttoned her shoes until she climbed into the wagon, yet there was not a vestige of fatigue on her smooth plump face. When Mrs. Barrett was making the chicken salad, Lillie snatched a moment to taste her breakfast, standing at the kitchen table and rubbing knives between times.

"Sit down, Lillie, and eat your breakfast properly," Mrs. Barrett remonstrated when she noticed her; but Lillie only flashed her white teeth in a broad smile.

"La, Mrs. Barrett, I can't never eat nothin' when I'm goin' somewheres. I is just makin' out I'm eatin'."

"But if you don't eat, you will be tired to death before night."

"No'm I won't. I does just this very way every time I goes to a picnic or anything." So Lillie went on with her work as gaily as if it were a part of the day's fun, and had it all finished in plenty of time too.

It would not have done for a straight-laced housekeeper to have gone behind Lillie and examined things too closely after she had deserted the kitchen, for she would have found many things to shock her sense of what a well ordered kitchen should be. She would, without doubt, have found a dirty dish-rag or two here, a half wiped pan there, and a little pile of dirt in every dark corner, besides the seldom absent uncleaned pot, left to soak under the stove. But—ah, well, what are such trifles when compared with a sunny nature, and that quintessence of charity—the spirit that never irritates another? Better to go to a place of innocent pleasure now and then than to stay at home always and fret over inevitable dirt; for dirt is like the poor, we have it always with us here and a whole eternity of it to claim us as its own when this brief somnambulism we call life is done.

Allen sat beside Lillie with his shoulders humped over in a position of typical nigger don't-careness, but he was nevertheless looking forward to a fine time, and to an increase in his finances caused by an occasional half dollar gathered in for sundry services he purposed offering young gentlemen in the way of holding horses and brushing shoes.

Allen was young, hardly more than twenty-two, and something of a dude on a moderate scale. He was of considerably lighter complexion than his companion, being what a colored person would call "bright skin." He was good-natured and easy-going in his disposition, like Lillie, but he sorely lacked Lillie's industry. Like

most good looking young men of his years and station, which latter had enabled him to attend the parish school throughout his childhood, Allen Whitney was decidedly lazy. Mr. Barrett often told him that if he expended as much energy in accomplishing work as he did in avoiding it, he would achieve great things before he died. Allen had a fair understanding of what Mr. Barrett meant, although he could not have given a dictionary definition of each word used, and as was his habit when Mr. Barrett rebuked, he grinned good humoredly and said nothing.

Lillie was supposed to be going to Asola for the purpose of taking care of the children and assisting them and the two ladies in dressing for the ball, and Allen was going, so he would have said if asked, to take the trunk and portion of the supper and to look after the horses; and unmistakably they each would attend conscientiously to the several duties apportioned them while there, and there was no harm whatever in their using eyes and ears incidentally after reaching their destination.

In the meantime both young darkies were exercising their vocal powers in the manner habitual to them. They were too intimately associated with each other to be able to find any very weighty subject to discuss, or any brilliant remark to make; and moreover, there was but one clearly defined idea in either head. They were on their way to the grandest entertainment ever given in the parish, and with that thought surging through their minds, there was only room left for the lightest and most transient reflections.

"Lord, this is goin' to be another one of them hot days!" Allen exclaimed, mopping the perspiration from his face and neck with a red cotton handkerchief; the new white silk handkerchief he had bought for the occasion was too good to use, and he intended to re-

serve it until he could flash it forth in its unsullied beauty, where it would produce the highest effect. The young negro so seldom wore a coat in summer, that to have worn one on a hot September day like this, would have been more than he could have endured. That, however, was not the only reason it was laid aside. He wore a pair of elegant yellow satin suspenders, and they were too attractive to be concealed beneath a coat and vest. As Allen wiped the crystal drops from his own brow, Lillie followed his example, giggled contentedly, and said in response to his remark:

"It certainly is hot! I wonder how those gent'men who is goin' to ride in the tournament is goin' to stand this weather. 'Pears to me like they'd most perish."

"Oh la," sniffed Allen, "they ain't a goin' to notice this heat. They'll be so taken up with the ridin' and havin' all those ladies lookin' at 'em, they won't have the sun to study 'bout."

Both laughed, and Allen touched up his mule to make her mend her gait a bit.

The road from Sigma to Asola wound through cotton fields almost due south, and directly back from the river. It followed a bayou, here and there, for a mile or two, then turned back again through the fields. There was no part of its way when the rows of cotton did not reach from the wheel tracks, away on one or both sides, except where the road lead through a mile of cool, fragrant woodland. The fields were still vividly green although the plants were rapidly maturing, and the pretty diurnal blossoms gleamed amid the broad glossy leaves in their peculiar way, pure white here, creamy, nearer the base of the stem, and on, shading from delicate pink to the closing flowers of dark crimson; and side by side with this variety of tints, the tender squares stood bravely above the plump green bolls, which in turn, stood above the dark brown burst

bolts, almond-satin lined, and overflowing with snowy, drooping fleece. The cotton was opening fast near the ground, and in some places was ready for the cotton pickers' nimble fingers, and his long white osnaburg bag.

As Nellie and Durieux reached Pecan Bayou that ran through Asola, and followed its course into the little town, they saw buggies ahead of them, and still others following the bayou road and coming on behind them.

It was just a quarter past twelve when they neared the town limits, and from that distance the music could be heard. Even the horse seemed to be thrilled by the strains of the brilliant tune the band was playing, and held his head with statlier grace.

Nellie's very finger tips seemed to respond to the queer excitement that only occasionally heard brass bands can send quivering through ones senses. Little Stella had never heard such music in all the five years of her life that she could recall, and being already overwrought with anticipation and the heat of the long drive, she threw her arms about her mother's neck and laughed and cried together in childish hysterics.

The court house lawn, where the tournament and shooting match were to be held, was already crowded when Mr. Barrett and Mr. Durieux drove into the enclosure. Several buggies and carriages had been drawn up near the elevated benches to be used as additional seats, and as every available bench and chair was already filled, the gentlemen drove up, also, and had Allen remove the horses, taking them to the stable, and leaving the surrey and buggy near enough for the ladies to be together while their escorts were taking part in the shooting. This part of the day's program consumed the remainder of the morning, but did not, as Nellie had predicted, bestow the honors upon her father. His score was good, if not the best, and after all, beat both

Mr. Durieux and Dr. Allison. Neither of these gentlemen were to take part in the riding, and soon after the gun match was decided, the Barrett party accepted Mrs. Hilliards' invitation, and went home with her to dinner.

Every house in Asola was dispensing hospitality to the throng of guests, and besides this, long tables were set in the wide, lower halls of the court house, and provided with all any one could desire to sustain the inner man.

There was a brief time allowed for resting between the hour for dining and the beginning of the riding, and the large jury rooms up stairs furnished as cloak rooms for the occasion, proved admirable lounging places during the interim.

The brass band was playing again when our party returned to their places on the grounds, and it was but a short time before the interesting ride for the rings began. It gave Nellie an odd little feeling of having been transported by fairies to the days of Cœur de Leon, as she took her seat in the buggy, surrounded by the intense crowd, and looked about her.

The band clashed its stirring martial strains, and two by two the knights in their gay courtier costumes and waving plumes, rode, with lancers at rest, down the track. Nellie had no difficulty in recognizing her friends, despite their unfamiliar attire, and joined the throng in waving her handkerchief in encouragement as they rode leisurely past. When the procession of knights made the circuit and returned to the judges' stand, reining up, each to await his turn in the tourney, there was a sudden hush of expectancy, and the marshal, mounted upon a magnificent black horse, rode to the front, and delivered his address to the ladies. He retired at its conclusion amid a stream of applause and then, one of the knights sallied forth.

As each successive young gentleman, with charging lance, dashed at fullest speed down the course, some little feminine heart beat faster, and some sweet maiden's spirits rose, as the ring told by its musical "click" that it was upon the lance; or fell, as her glances told her that the coveted circlet still hung upon its bracket, unsecured.

Nellie sat with bated breath, watching every movement of a certain two of the make-believe warriors, and a dawning dread gradually chilled her. These two, the Knight of the Pelican and the Knight of the Canebrake, were riding with equal success. Each had made his second tilt and the score stood six to six. The Knight of the Canebrake was just riding forward to begin his third round, and Nellie hushed her breathing.

Eagerly she listened, and her strained ear distinctly caught the sound "click"; a little fainter came the second sound, and fainter still the third, which was, nevertheless, acutely heard.

Three more rings, making the completed requirement.

The cheer that went up would have announced the knight's success, had not her own senses told her.

And then the Knight of the Pelican came boldly forth. Nellie saw him glance at her and lift his plumed hat confidently; she saw him touch his beautiful horse with his spur, and with a roaring in her ears that shut out all other sounds, she half closed her eyes and waited.

Another cheer went up, and the girl closed her lips tightly to restrain the cry that almost escaped her.

It seemed but a few moments before the marshal rode to the front and announced that the Knight of the Canebrake and the Knight of Pelican, having both secured the complete compliment of rings, would have

to ride again to decide which should have the honor of crowning the Queen of Love and Beauty.

Nellie sighed in relief and her spirits rose, but only for a moment. Second thought showed her that the complication was not yet at an end. Durieux who sat beside her, and one or two other young men standing near for the chance of winning some attention, spoke to her, but she answered absently.

The second tilt was ended, and she scarcely knew with what result. She watched the five successful young gentlemen ride up into a group in front of the judge's stand and hold a consultation. The two who had made the tie seemed to be discussing something, and the others laughed and looked around in her direction. Each knight selected an esquire from among the riders who had taken the least rings and sent him to the lady of his choice. Nellie saw two of the esquires coming straight toward herself, and she shrank among her cushions in dread.

She felt that total annihilation, anything, would be preferable to the ordeal before her.

As the two young gentlemen reached her side, they bowed in imitation of the courtly days of yore, when tournaments were the play of princes and red blood the trophy, instead of scarlet rings, and one of them, taking his cue from the marshal's graceful address, began in stilted dignity:

"Fairest lady of this fairest of earthly realms, Sir Knight of the Pelican sends me with the petition that you deign to accept the crown his valiant hand has won for your peerless brow. He—"

"For gracious sake hush, Jim," the other 'squire interposed in an exaggerated stage whisper, nudging him with his elbow. "Do give me a chance." He summarily pulled his opponent back by the sleeve and stepped into his place before the blushing girl. "No—

blest lady in the land," he continued, assuming an heroic attitude and placing his hand over the region of his heart, "Sir Knight of the Canebrake craves that your ladyship will bend from your lofty heights and look down in pity upon his yearning heart on this royal occasion. Allow him to offer you the honors he has won."

The young fellow overdid his part, as he intended, so ludicrously that those near enough to see him and hear his words broke into a merry laugh.

Nellie cast an appealing look upon her father and he came to her aid.

"Oh father," she cried in an undertone, "what on earth am I to do?"

"Why, my daughter, the one who offers you the queen's crown has best right to your consideration, because of his superior prowess. Do you not think so?"

"But father, what shall I do with the other one? Of course it is the greater honor to be the queen, but I was thinking if I took that one, it would make the girl who is then offered the first maid's crown feel badly at being second choice, but if I accept the maid's crown, almost any girl would be willing to be queen."

Mr. Barrett, proud of her unselfishness, looked fondly into his pretty daughter's distressed face.

"My dear, why should you trouble yourself about this? You cannot accept but one crown, neither are you responsible for the fact that both gentlemen prefer to have you share his honors."

The tears almost sprang into Nellie's eyes.

"Oh father, you don't understand! I am so miserable, for I am to blame for it all. This dreadful confusion is all my fault. Don't you see—I was foolish enough to promise them both."

Mr. Barrett started in surprise. "My child, how could you!"

Nellie hung her head. "I never thought, that was it. I promised without thinking, for it never occurred to me that either one of them would be so successful. Mr. Northcot told me when he asked me to accept his crown, if he won it, that he had little hope of success, because his horse was so nervous; he was afraid she would become frightened and unruly; and you know, you said yourself, that Mr. Wayman often failed to take even three rings. I didn't think it would be possible for both to win," she mused, in conclusion.

"Ah! And so my daughter thought she would try to stay on both sides of the fence!"

"Oh, father!"

"Well, well," said Mr. Barrett, sorry that he had rebuked the distressed girl by his momentary sarcasm, "you must hasten and make a decision. Every one is waiting."

Nellie cast a hurried glance about her, and shrank further back from the merry quistical eyes turned upon her.

"Father, this is dreadful! How can I stand to have everybody looking at me this way! Take me home—oh, please take me home. Tell them I am sick—anything. Really my head aches violently."

"No, no," remonstrated Mr. Barrett kindly, "that would never do. You must not let your day be spoiled by this. You have been looking forward to tonight's ball for a month. Come, I will speak to the gentlemen and try to effect an explanation. What shall you tell them, yourself?"

Nellie's brow contracted for a moment in deep thought. She lifted her troubled eyes. "Wouldn't it be best to tell the gentlemen exactly how it was?"

Mr. Barrett smiled, pleased with her decision. He thought if her sweet girlish candor could not explain away the difficulty and restore good feeling, nothing else could.

"Very well then," he said, "I will go to the gentlemen and ask them to decide between themselves which shall crown you."

As Mr. Barrett joined the two 'squires and with them went in the direction of the waiting knights, Durieux, who had gotten out of the buggy when he saw that Nellie wanted to talk to her father, again took his place and opened such a fire of light chatter that the girl partially forgot her dilemma until Mr. Barrett returned.

"They have decided to ride over again," that gentleman said, as he came to her, "and for the sake of the girl whom the unsuccessful knight must choose, they have agreed to say that the hesitation was due to a mistake causing another tie."

"You precious darling!" exclaimed the grateful girl, "I knew you could help me out! But tell me," she added, more seriously, "do they seem angry with me?"

Mr. Barrett laughed. "Neither one is any too well pleased. I think you will have to be an extraordinarily good girl indeed to make pleasant terms with the one who is defeated in riding this tilt."

"Oh, I'll just do anything that's reasonable to make amends! I'll explain that it was because I was a thoughtless little goose and not because I was wilfully wicked. I'll say just exactly how it was."

"Yes, but see here, Miss Nellie," put in Durieux, who had heard part of her explanation to her father, "you said just now that you really thought neither of them would be successful. Do you mean to openly express your doubts of their skill to these gentlemen?"

"Ah, *tenez-vous tranquille!*" Nellie cried saucily, returning to her French as her spirits regained their equanimity. "I refuse to discuss the matter with you at all," she went on. "There, look, they are beginning to ride again!"

The tilt was soon concluded, resulting in victory again for the Knight of Pelican. The marshal came forward for the last time and proclaimed the names of the victorious knights, and also of the young ladies who were to be the Queen of Love and Beauty and her four maids of honor.

The ceremony of crowning was not to take place until night, in the ball-room, and the crowd having witnessed all that was to transpire before that event, dispersed to rest and to prepare for the ball. The sun was just setting when Mrs. Barrett and her party again repaired to her cousin's home and found that lady busily engaged in serving iced tea to the crowd of friends sitting on the gallery and in the hall, where the coolest breezes were to be found.

CHAPTER XI.

It was somewhat after nine o'clock when Mr. and Mrs. Barrett, preceded by Stella and Virgil, and followed by Nellie and Mr. Durieux, entered the ball room. The extensive apartment, which upon legitimate occasions was the court room, had been stripped of its legal appurtenances and converted, as it had often been before, into a place of enjoyment for our dance loving people.

As Nellie crossed the threshold of the central door, voices on all sides were heard in undertones, exclaiming: "The queen, here comes Miss Nellie Barrett—here's the queen at last. Now we'll see the crowning, and the dancing can begin."

Alvah Northcot, the Knight of Pelican, was standing near the door waiting for her. He hastened up, and offering his arm, was about to lead her to the dais on the opposite side of the room, when Durieux interposed.

"Not so fast, if you please, Sir Knight. Just wait an instant until I can get a program for our queen and put my name upon it. Ah, here is one now."

Durieux intercepted the young boy who was distributing cards of the dance among the guests, and took two from him.

"If I let Miss Nellie go with you without the promise of a set, my chances will be gone for the evening. Now Miss Nellie," he added, writing as he spoke, "I shall have the first set after the royal quadrille, may I not,—and this waltz on the second half? Thanks."

He bowed, and extended the card toward her, but before Nellie's hand could touch it, half a dozen larger hands were thrust into the way, and the program cir-

culated among their owners until the first side was closely filled with names.

As Nellie and Northcot stood chatting amid the crowd near the door, waiting for the program to be returned to her, the marshal hastened to them.

"Say boys," he cried, "you are delaying things dreadfully. Come, let Alvah take Miss Barrett to the dais. Everybody is impatient to see the crowning and begin the dance."

Northcot again offered her his arm, and together they walked the length of the room. To Nellie the distance had never seemed so great before. With the eyes of the crowd watching her every movement, she had that chilling sensation of a sleeper who tries to rush from danger and feels that his feet refuse to move.

They were a charming couple, these two. He, tall and heroically proportioned, with the faultlessness of his figure thrown into relief by his close fitting knee breeches of ruby velvet, and silken hose. His gilt embroidered zouave jacket with his emblem bird emblazoned upon each front, and his wide lace collar, fitting snugly over a silk blouse, which, like his hose, was of that pink which tinges the summer horizon between sunset and twilight, and the whole gave him a strikingly distinguished air, both noble and poetic.

Nellie beside him, dainty, tall and slender, looked the regal personage she represented, in her faintly blue dress, soft and floating, revealing her flawless neck and arms and enhancing the beauty of her majestically poised head.

As they reached the dais, and took their places amid the pretty maids of honor and their gorgeously attired cavaliers, a murmur of admiration was awakened that rose into a loud cheer before it died away.

Nellie bowed her graceful head to receive the wreath of forget-me-nots that proclaimed her queen, and waited

until her maids were crowned about her, then the royal party descended to the floor, and being joined by the marshal and a lady from among the spectators whom he had chosen, the initial quadrille was formed.

This was almost the only set during the evening that was danced with any degree of real pleasure. For after this, when all who wished were at liberty to join, the crush was so intense that it amounted to but little more than dodging one's way through the surging mass, to the strains of violins and harp, rather than dancing.

Every one in the parish was there; and besides these, three other parishes were well represented, as was also the city across the river. At an affair given as this one was, by two benevolent societies, the Knights of Pythias and Knights of Honor, whose democratic principles embrace recruits from every strata of the social mountain, it was expected that the throng would be great and varied.

There is no tangible line drawn among social sets in this country where each man has all the elbow room he can desire, yet there is a distinction felt by each class, and these, coming in constant social contact, meet in genial courtesy, mingle, but rarely mix. The enforced law of this heterogeneous structure is, that by common consent, criminals shall be debarred from its ranks; but for the rest, each set realizes its inherent station and abides therewith. Every one assumes his best behavior together with his best suit of clothes, and going to the place of amusement, seeks nothing else than pleasure.

Nellie did not know even half of the people who were present, the greater portion of whom she had never seen before, and one of her amusements during the evening was guessing what names belonged to certain faces, and wondering why it was that she who had lived in the parish all her life, did not, after all, know

all its people. Neither were all the royal party her acquaintances. Her first maid of honor was her dearest girl friend, Carrie; and this pretty maiden, having consoled the Knight of the Canebrake by accepting the distinction she could not, harmony seemed restored. The second maid of honor, a beautiful Jewess whom Nellie knew quite well, was a girl of refinement and culture. She had come to this land of the free to live with relatives because the family bank account in Germany was not elastic enough to provide her and each of her six sisters with dowries of a size to enable them all to marry men of their own station at home. She was exquisitely dressed, and was admired greatly by many besides her Jewish cavalier, and he, a man highly esteemed, was the son of one who years before began his American mercantile career with a pack upon his back and a pair of stout walking boots upon his feet. The third maid was a bayou-side belle of sixteen care-free summers, with two leading ideas, balls and beaux.

As this self-conscious young woman entered the room and was met by her gallant, she tossed her head in keen appreciation of the importance of her position and giggled with childish complaisance.

"I hope I haven't kept you all waiting," she simpered. "Mama just looked like she never was going to be ready."

"Oh that's all right;" reassured her admirer, "don't anybody mind waitin' for you. I would a went for you myself if I'd a known where you was at."

This flattered beauty was quite as well satisfied with herself as any other young woman in the house, and was equally contented with her favorite lover.

She had flatly refused to be sent back to school, and by way of domineering over her parents, held the threat of running away with this same lover constantly before them. The young gentleman, for gentleman he

certainly was if the prevailing definition of that term is to be relied upon, was a handsome fellow, always well dressed. He had never earned a dollar by the sweat of his brow in the twenty-three years of his life; nor had he labored at anything more arduous than winning at a horse race or a game of cats. He lived at his ease, as a gentleman is supposed to do, and owned one of the handsomest, fleetest horses in the state.

After this dashing young pair came the fourth and last maid of honor—a girl who taught school for the support of herself and mother as a profession, and sewed and cooked when not engaged with pedagogic duties. She had, besides her erudition, a genealogical table somewhere at home that showed her descent from nine generations of representative Americans, and as many others of an older country, including among its members soldiers and statesmen of no mean order. Her knight was in every way worthy of herself, being a young lawyer with excellent family connections and hereditary intellect sufficient to promise him a brilliant future.

Mrs. Barrett with a group of ladies sat near one of the great open windows, watching the young people gliding about. At her right was Mrs. Hilliard, a woman with decided opinions upon most matters, and not reluctant to express these when she felt that she was right in her estimate of the subject under discussion. She was several years younger than Mrs. Barrett and far more self assertive, yet there was a strong personal resemblance between them and a great similarity of tastes.

The lady who sat at Mrs. Barrett's left was Mrs. Minor, at one time a famous beauty and belle but now mostly a structure of petty affectations, former date education, handsome diamonds, powder and a bit of rouge. She was a woman who, in her younger days,

had traveled and seen a good deal of the world with its company manners on. She had come into it with the traditional silver spoon, and a splendid one it was at that, ready for her, and she had spent much of her time since bewailing the uncongenial circumstances which compelled her to battle almost single handed with privations that she scorned to acknowledge acquaintance with. Then, fate, not seeming satisfied with using her aristocratic nature for a foot-ball, had added greater disappointment than all in the person of Vincent, her only son.

Mrs. Minor fanned herself with the same graceful dignity she acquired in the zenith of her belledom, and lamented the degeneracy of society in general and of Louisiana in particular.

"Ah," she sighed, with an uplifting of her still bright eyes, "society was not once what it is now! Never did I think to see the day when our class would willingly mingle with such people as are here to-night. Think, Cornelia, of mothers allowing their daughters to attend places of entertainment like this, where if participating in a quadrille or lancers their hands must necessarily come in contact with hands of men whom they would never consent to meet on terms of equality elsewhere. Ah, things were quite different when I was a girl."

Mrs. Barrett winced slightly. She was the only one of the three who had a young lady daughter at the ball, for Mrs. Minor's was married and at home with her small family. Mrs. Hilliard, on the other hand, smiled behind Mrs. Minor's averted face and wondered how that lady failed to know that her own son was one of the few whom young ladies with the proper spirit, and Nellie Barrett conspicuously among that number, refused to perceive.

"Do you really believe," she questioned of Mrs.

Minor, "that we are deteriorating, or is it not probably due to the different view we take of intrinsic worth?"

"Unquestionably to the different views of to-day," Mrs. Minor returned, smiling patronizingly upon Mrs. Hilliard as one too young to have previously judged of such matters, and again Mrs. Hilliard's lips curved into a quaint smile. She thought again of Vincent Minor and the manner in which he was faithfully reflecting his father's aristocratic vices in a mirror less polished than that sire had done before him. Mrs. Minor would have said, if asked, that girls were too innocent in her youth to be aware that moral deformities existed; and if asked how one could expect the son to escape inheriting evil as well as virtue from his progenitor, she would have been shocked at the up-to-date woman's question and shrunk from her contaminating influence.

Mrs. Hilliard did her own thinking, and the older woman went on talking.

"What is strangest of all to me," she said, "is not only that our former exclusiveness is gone, but that our girls are allowed to attend these social functions alone with young men. In my girlhood no young lady drove several miles with a gentleman unaccompanied by a chaperone."

Mrs. Minor appealed to Mrs. Barrett. "Do you not regret, Cornelia, that this deplorable condition of affairs exists?"

Mrs. Barrett moved uneasily, feeling that this criticism touched upon her own method with Nellie rather severely. She wondered if Mrs. Minor meant to take her to task, but that lady intended nothing of the kind. She was looking at facts collectively and comparing the times with that of thirty years ago, when she was the reigning belle and Mrs. Barrett but a bit of a school girl. Mrs. Minor repeated her question and Cornelia Barrett had to give her opinion.

"Really, Mrs. Minor, I have never thought of it one way or another. I have simply accepted existing customs. All of the other girls go alone to parties with their gentlemen friends, and naturally Nellie has 'gone with the procession'." Mrs. Barrett laughed, and Mrs. Minor, shaking her head sadly, turned to Mrs. Hilliard, who, as soon as she was confronted by Mrs. Minor's inquiringly arched eyebrows and deprecating shrug, parted her lips with her habitual decisiveness.

"No indeed. I see nothing to deplore. I have often thought how much it argues in favor of our youth that such a condition of social liberties is possible. It may be necessary in some countries to keep girls and young men under surveillance, and if it is, it only reflects all the more credit upon our young men, whom experience shows can take as good care of another's sister, as of their own. Comparing our methods with European customs, I think it speaks volumes in favor of our men."

"And the purity and common sense of our girls," interposed Mrs. Barrett, stimulated by her cousin's vehemence and amused as she spoke by the horrified expression upon Mrs. Minor's countenance.

Further discussion of the subject was prevented by the approach of Vivian, a twelve year old daughter of Mrs. Hilliard, who with her boyish partner, came up to them.

"You tired of your set soon," Mrs. Barrett said to her, smiling.

"No'm," the boy answered. "We weren't tired but we had to stop because we couldn't get along at all. The crowd is dreadful."

"Yes, mama," said Vivian, "it is! Somebody stepped on my foot, and before I could get over that, somebody else bumped against my back so it nearly took my breath away."

"And," put in her mother, "the moral of it all is that children should not try to dance at grown people's parties."

The boy and Vivian exchanged glances and laughed.

"Vivian, where are Stella and Virgil?" Mrs. Barrett asked as the juvenile couple turned to go.

"They are asleep in the dressing room. Lillie made Allen bring her the carriage cushions, and with them and the shawls she has made them the nicest sort of a bed."

"Ain't you sleepy, too?"

"Why, mama! The idea! No indeed. I'm having too nice a time to be sleepy. I've danced nearly every set."

"You mean you've tried to," laughed the boy.

"Well, I tried to then, if I must be so particular about the truth; but I enjoyed it just the same. My," she added, laughing, "ain't it hot in here? And no place to sit down either."

"Come, let's go out on the gallery, where there are plenty of benches."

Vivian Hilliard took her young friend's arm and together they worked their way through the crowd to the cool gallery where there were seats in plenty, illuminated by the rows of Japanese lanterns that swung from the edge of the roof, in addition to the moon's brilliant light.

Supper had been served in the halls below, and the second half of the program was nearly through. The violins were playing a spirited polka and to its time Dr. Allison and Nellie drifted, making use of the lazy walk-step alternately with the glide. Nellie had danced so unceasingly at the importunity of her partners that she was thoroughly tired, and scarcely noticed whither Dr. Allison was guiding her, until he stopped at the door leading into the end of the hall, and laying the

hand he held, upon his arm, conducted her to a little balcony that stood out from the hall at the side of the building. He found her a chair and sank into another near by. The music went on in the ball room, for the set had little more than commenced when Allison, knowing that the balcony was empty, made good his opportunity to secure it for himself. There was only room enough upon it for two people at a time and was intended more for ornamenting the handsome courthouse than for actual utility. It was so delightfully restful out there as compared with the brilliant lights and heat within, that for a time both young people sat in silence. Nellie sighed in pure relief for this oasis in the wilderness of sounds and mirth, and her companion arose and turned his chair around, placing it nearer the girl's and so that it fronted the long open window giving egress to their retreat. When his chair was arranged and he seated again, he leaned forward and eagerly looked upon Nellie's moon-illuminated face.

"Are you tired much?" he murmured.

The words were so common-place that they might have been shouted above the noise within, yet the tone in which they were spoken was so ineffably tender, that Nellie started and looked suddenly into the speaker's face. There was only a glance, and her eyes fell. She tried to answer carelessly, but the thrilling steadfastness of those wonderful eyes, set her heart beating faster, and she spoke scarcely above a whisper:

"Yes."

She sat with her head bent forward and her restless fingers opening and shutting her fan. Allison watching her intently, rested one elbow upon his knee, and leaning toward her, ruthlessly twisted his mustache, breaking out one after another of the strands unconsciously. At last he spoke:

"Miss Nellie," he said intently, "heaven knows I

have tried to keep from telling you how I love you—tried not to tell you until there was some chance that I can see, to ask you to marry me. Tonight I cannot help myself. I feel that I would give the best years of my life just for the delight of telling you how sweet, sweet, sweet, you are, and how passionately I love you!”

As he spoke he leaned nearer until his lips almost touched her ear, but she sat so still, her head only sinking a little lower, that Allison started back in dread.

“Miss Nellie!” he cried, suppressing his tones, “for God’s sake, don’t say that I am mistaken—don’t say that you have seen my love all this time, and now mean to throw me over!”

There was such pain, such misery, in his hurried uttered words that Nellie was dismayed. She turned her head and looked at him again as she whispered reproachfully:

“How could you say that?”

Allison in turn, read immutable love in a glance, and his heart beat with such ecstasy that he could express his thanks in no way but by clasping her hand, and kissing it fervently. A happy little laugh bubbled from his heart.

“Then you don’t consider me a fool?”

She, too, laughed softly, joyously, and answered playfully: “I’m not so sure of that.”

“Why?” he asked, too delighted with what her eyes had told, to heed the words from her lips.

“For wasting your time on such as I.”

“Darling!”

Allison again squeezed the hand he had not released, and laughed softly.

Neither of them had noticed that the polka they deserted was over, and that the dancers were promenading in the ball-room and hall, the scores of feet making a dull, roaring sound as they moved ceaselessly

around. A negro passing coffee among the guests came toward them and Allison had barely time to drop the hand he held before he stepped upon the balcony before them.

"Have some coffee, Sir?"

"Won't you take some, Miss Nellie?" Allison asked, his voice sounding so unnatural and flippant that the girl laughed, and in turn her tones seemed strangely silly.

"No, thank you," and she laughed again.

Allison sobered up. "Perhaps you would better," he said, the physician rising superior to the lover.

"Are you not very tired?"

"Will you take a cup if I do?"

"Yes."

There was a meeting of bashful eyes, and soft laughter, and these two, almost beside themselves with their new happiness, took the cups, and were once more left alone. The coffee did do Nellie good, for it refreshed her tired body and steadied her nerves so that she could bear her bliss with more composure, and when the darkey returned with his empty tray, she put her cup upon it and said, "Thank you," naturally. Just as she did so, she heard the negro band-master calling the next set.

Nellie hastily picked up her card. "Whom have I promised this Number," she cried, consulting it. "Oh yes, to Mr. Durieux. Come, I must go in so he can find me."

"Just a moment!" Allison caught her hand again.

"Let me tell you once more I love you, I love you, I love you! Darling, won't you tell me that you love me?"

"Nellie showed through her eloquent eyes all the love she could not speak, but she shook her head slowly.

"Just one word," he coaxed, "only one? Can't

you then say, 'dear Ed'? Won't you say that?—just 'dear Ed,' once, that's all I ask," he pleaded.

Nellie felt that she must not linger. She parted her lips, but the words would not come. She lifted her hand that was clasped in her lover's strong, firm, fingers, bringing both nearer, and pressed her soft pink cheek for an instant against the back of his ungloved hand; then springing to her feet and taking Allison's arm, together they somehow went the short distance that lay between the balcony and ball-room; just within, they met Jules Durieux; he put his arm about Nellie's waist, and glided with her amid the throng.

Allison went back to the balcony and sat in the chair Nellie had quitted, pressing his lips to his hand that still thrilled with the velvety contact of her fair face. He laughed in his intoxication, and hated to break the delicious spell that held him in bliss that was divine. If there was some way to make that pulsing caress indelible, how gladly he would embrace it! He pressed his own cheek to his hand as she had done, and then hurriedly, he went in search of the partner who was waiting for him.

CHAPTER XII.

Durieux wrapped Nellie's soft, white shawl carefully about her before he helped her into the buggy, and as he spread the linen lap-cloth over her silken skirts, he urged her to draw her zephyr hood more closely about her head. Mr. and Mrs. Barrett and the children were ready to start for home, too, and Mr. Barrett held his reins, waiting, leaned out, and called, "All ready?"

"All ready!" answered Durieux cheerily, and Mr. Barrett taking the lead, the two conveyances rolled off briskly, leaving Allen and Lillie to follow as soon as the former could climb into the wagon where Lillie sat nodding, a piece of cake in her hand. She waked up with a jump as Allen gave his mule a tap, and took another bite of cake.

Their long nap in the dressing room, followed by their coming into the fresh night—or rather morning air, for it was after three o'clock—waked the children thoroughly and they fell to chattering in the liveliest manner. This would have been all well enough if they had been willing to make their conversation a duet, but almost every remark concluded with "Didn't it, mother?" or "Wasn't it, father?" which demanded constant appearance of attention on the part of their sleepy parents.

Nellie and Durieux revived, too, at first, as the cool purity of the air aroused them, and many events of the day were gone over again in interchange of thought, but by and by, as the night grew darker, and the fatigue of the long drive was added to that of dancing, and the day's excitement, Nellie became more and more subdued, until she sat in total silence. She was think-

ing of the compliments that had been showered upon her since the day's pleasures began, and unknowingly, she was thinking that all of these combined, failed, when compared with the delicious moment when the greatest compliment of her life was offered her,—when Edward Allison, unable to withstand the inward pressure of his love, had, against his will and better judgment, told her how precious she was to him. She was thinking of all this, drifting off into a reverie that made her oblivious of where she was, or with whom. She was floating in a paradise of sweet recollections that held but two beings—her lover, and herself to be loved.

The man beside her was thinking, too; hard, bitter, miserable thoughts. Never before had his lot seemed so hard, his limitations so narrowed. He hated the fate that placed him, a man of refinement, of culture and luxurious tastes, in the semi-menial position he held: manager of a plantation where, day after day, the worry of contact with thick-headed, rascally negroes was his hourly portion. He felt that he hated the whole race of miserable mongrels, whose sense of honor was little broader, little higher than the lowest of brutes. He hated the thought that with the coming of the day, the same eternal vigilance, which was the only price of liberty for the white man who hired the negro, must begin and go monotonously over again.

He hated the circumstances that made him poor—made him dependent upon his constant exertions for his daily bread, and left him with so little to lay aside for the proverbial rainy day. All his existence seemed so contracted, so hard, so pregnant with the reason why life was not worth the living!

He hated his pride—the one strong legacy inherited from his ancestors. This had once been a source of self-congratulation, and he was content to think that in descending to him it formed a bulwark in his

nature. He had been content with it, and with the courage that bore him up to labor and to wait; but now the futility of it all mocked him like a grinning demon.

His pride was the characteristic that had sealed his lips. He would not bring himself to ask her love of the woman who could look down upon his poverty. He would not ask her to leave her life of ease, of plenty, to share the restrictions that held him in a circle so narrow. The woman he loved should never feel that she lost, in becoming his wife. She should be elevated, or she should never know his temptation to tell her of his love.

Nellie Barrett had never in her life had a wish ungratified that money could command, and Durieux almost hated the man who could trade upon her inexperience and ask of her sacrifices that she now knew nothing of; and yet Durieux was just and could not scorn his rival. He had not been blinded by his hope into belief in future security. When Dr. Allison first came, he saw his danger. He watched the two together, and saw the color come and go in her translucent cheeks, as the guileless girl showed her growing preference for the stranger. In the beginning he tried that strongest weapon against woman, ridicule, hoping with it to check her growing interest, but only failed.

In his justice, he could but acknowledge that Allison was right in seeking what he so well knew she would scarce be able to withhold. He had foreseen it all. In calm jealousy he noted every glance that passed between them when they were together in his presence; and that night, as he met them in the doorway returning from the balcony, he saw that the die had been cast, and that he, too, must abide by the throw.

He saw the tell-tale light in the face of each, that was like the sting of a viper. With smiling lips that

covered an aching heart, he went to her, and in a voice that sounded hard only to himself, because he alone knew that he suffered, he claimed his partner. Allison, smiling unconsciously in his rapture, gave her up with a little air of proprietorship that was maddening.

Nellie, oblivious of the conflict raging within the man beside her, yet perhaps esoterically influenced by it, drifted from joyous into troubled reflections. She realized that it would be a long, long time before Dr. Allison could come for her, and give her the privilege of being always by his side, and not only was this waiting unavoidable, but to it she knew would be added her father's disapproval to make the coming years drag wearily.

Durieux' horse, which in his abstraction had been allowed to go drowsily on, trusting to his instincts to keep the path, drew the buggy too far to the right, and striking a small stump, aroused his driver abruptly.

Durieux turned his head and saw that his companion had not felt the jolt, and was still lost in deep meditation. He smiled bitterly as he thought of the surprise the knowledge of his own misery would be to her. He pulled himself together with an effort, and exclaimed in mock alarm:

"Miss Nellie, say, wake up! I'll be lonesome if you go to sleep!"

Nellie laughed softly. "I am not asleep," she said, "but I was beginning to think you were, from the way you were driving." She laughed again and went on: "Please don't ask me to talk, though, for my poor jaws fairly ache with the excessive exercise they have had today. They feel exhausted; and I have laughed until the muscles of my face seem set in an eternal grin. It is no wonder we grow wrinkled and ugly is it, when we have too good a time?"

Durieux laughingly agreed with her, and silence fell

between them again, leaving Nellie to return to her perplexity over one of the greatest puzzles of her life. Intuitively she knew that her father did not like Dr. Allison, and why this aversion existed she could not comprehend. To her it seemed the irony of fate that two men, so noble, so true, so alike in all that was best, could fail to understand each other.

The world had gradually thrown off its gloom, the grey ether revealed objects dimly on the horizon, and the trees that were nearest were now individuals. The sky was becoming softer and paler, and lowly insects crept away through the weeds. A partridge, followed by her half-grown family, scurried noiselessly across the roadway, and vanished beneath the cotton's dewy foliage.

A plantation bell in the distance rang out suddenly its solemn, dew-muffled notes, and Nellie started shivering. Durieux watched her averted face, and as the bell still uttered its deep-toned music he saw her shiver again. Determining to break the silence that was at best only misery to him, he laughed shortly.

"Poor little girl," he said lightly, "are you so sleepy?"

"No," she answered seriously, still looking away from him. "I am waking up now. See, it is beginning to grow pink over yonder above the tree tops. And listen to that bell! Isn't it all—ah, I can't express myself; it is something that one cannot describe and can only feel—don't you understand—the powerful silence, the awful stillness of it all?" She looked earnestly into his eyes for sympathy as she went on. "There is only one other thing as deeply tragic to me as this—the dawn, and that is that great thing over there." She waved her hand toward the river that was concealed by the breadth of the fields and the trees that intervened. "In either case," she continued, speaking in

English as she always did when feeling deeply, "you cannot see the power, you can only feel that it is there. Mountains tower above, and you can realize the limit of their strength, and the sea murmurs and warns by constantly restless waves, but the river, and this, is so silent, so powerful, so alluring, that it almost makes me cry out in pain at the knowledge of its tremendous might and my own littleness. If they were not so still, so subtle in their coming, it would not seem so hard to understand, but they represent that awful unseen Something that bears us on against all struggle, all opposition. We can no more check the flowing of the one, than the coming of the other. Silently they both glide on and humanity seems, when compared with the force that drives them on, so weak, so utterly in vain. Think how we plan our lives, how we planned and carried out the great event of yesterday, and how, now, with the dawn of today it is all done and cast away like a dead flower. We, exhausted and unable to go any further, must stop to rest while this uncontrollable something goes on, never ageing, ever, ever, ever, in a seeming great circle, and we wonder if it ever had a beginning or will ever have an end! The unfamiliarity of it all is what makes it seem so unreal. I, too, feel strange and as though I did not belong to my body or any one particular place. Such a yearning for something better—such a realization of my own limitations, makes me almost cry out in despair!" As she spoke she leaned further forward; still looking at her companion's down-cast face, she touched his arm. "Do you not feel the awful mystery of it, too?"

"No!" Durieux answered in his short, cold English.

"Mr. Durieux! —"

Jules turned his head and feasted his eyes upon what to him was the greatest mystery of all that had ever emanated from a creator's hands. Instead of the cry

that she spoke of suppressing, he closed his lips tightly to control the groan of misery that almost burst his heart. Her earnest face in its pallor showed white and wierd in the grey gloom, and her eyes, defying sleep, looked wide and black. What would he not forfeit for one moment of ecstasy that was his if he dared but snatch it. They were all alone, surrounded by the wide open fields, in the midst of the languid dawn. Mr. Barrett had driven on briskly while he was lost in abstraction, and was entirely out of sight. Durieux still looked upon her, outwardly cold and calm. What would he not give for one moment in which to clasp that tired angel-like form, with its restless, questioning spirit, in his arms and hold her, his! With his passionate kisses to claim her as his own, if but for an instant before she gave herself to that other, entirely and for always!

He gazed into the upturned face so near his own, for what seemed a long time, and when at last he could control his voice, he laughed gratingly. Nellie, who was attuned only to the sublimity of the coming day, almost hated him for his harsh mirth.

"No," he cried hardly, "familiarity brings contempt no doubt, and perhaps if you had to be up every morning when that bell rings and watch the glow of dawn-day streak the east simultaneously with the nigger putting plow gear on his mule, you would find the greatest mystery, the greatest human limitations, not in the inevitable dawn, but in the inevitable revolution of eternal toil!" As Durieux spoke, he felt his voice grow stronger, and assuming a half heroic tone to conceal the sarcasm in his soul, he made the girl laugh in spite of herself. As tantalizing, teasing as ever, she saw in him only the man she knew in her childhood, and, shrinking from what she believed was his inability to understand her, she sought escape from his criticism in ironical retreat.

"Oh, you wicked thing!" she laughed, forcing her gayety. "How can you disenchant me so! Here you are again, filling your favorite *role* of my iconoclast." She simulated his tragic air with half childishness taking the place of his acrimony.

"Don't you know," she began, "—no you don't, because it's a secret, and you musn't tell—but really, the only reason I ever wanted to be a man, apart from when I was little, and wanted to be a boy so as to have plenty of pockets, was, that if I were a man I could stay up all night long, and watch every phase of its wonderful beauty."

"Well, why don't you any way?" Durieux asked teasingly.

Nellie laughed, embarrassed, and admitted "Because I'm afraid."

Durieux threw his head back and laughed heartily, this time with the true ring of mirth in his tones.

"Is you skeered o' ghos'es?" he whispered mysteriously, drawing himself together, and crouching into the farthest corner of his side of the buggy, his eyes rolling in true negro fright.

"No," Nellie answered slowly and reflectively, "I am not afraid of ghos'es; I'm afraid of that great mystery I was telling you of; and of the utter loneliness—the feeling that I was the only thing alive. Really," she went on after a moment's pause, "if I was a boy, I would jump on my horse, and dash across the country, never missing a single moment of a beautiful moonlight night."

"That would be a good scheme," commented Durieux, nodding his head in mock approval. "You know, then you would be up to see that the hands went to the field on time without the trouble of getting up for the purpose. If you were a boy you'd have another advantage too, you see. You'd have to work."

Nellie was disgusted. "I am not going to talk to you any more," she pouted. "You are determined to be prosy and ridicule everything I say!" She drew herself as far from him as she could and looked at him severely.

Durieux began whipping his horse and urging him forward. "Get-up Prince, let's put Miss Nellie out of our buggy as soon as we can; she's naughty," he said without looking at her again, and in a few moments they had drawn up at the gate, where Mr. Barrett was helping Stella, limp with sleep, out of the surrey.

It was almost daylight, and a few contrary chickens had already gotten over the fence and were sauntering among the flower beds.

Durieux, with pretense of great haste, helped Nellie out of his buggy, and leaving her at the front steps with her mother, drove off, while the others went into the house. As the sun in gilded red showed above the wood across the river, Nellie fell into a deep dreamless sleep, and Durieux reached the house on Englehart, five miles further on.

He passed by the kitchen on his way to his room, and asked the old darkey to bring him coffee there. When he reached his apartment, he slowly took off his evening coat and laid it over the back of a chair, and untied his cravat; then he tossed it away, and seating himself near the chair, drew a long, white kid glove from an inner pocket of the coat, and gazed upon it. It was of no further use to its owner now; she had dropped it in the bottom of the buggy where the dew had fallen heavily, and there was a print of a slipper-toe on the long wrist. Jules took his handkerchief and carefully wiped off all the dust except that left by the waxed shoe; then folding it in the handkerchief, together with the button-hole bouquet she had pinned upon his coat, he laid the little package in the bottom

of his trunk, under everything else, and closed the lid upon it.

He swallowed his coffee, and exchanging the rest of his evening clothes for a sunburnt suit that better accorded with his avocation, he went into the lot to watch the darkies getting their cotton sacks and baskets ready for the day's work.

Arthur Wheeler drove up, gave his horse and buggy over to the hostler and without talking to anyone, went to his room in the store and tumbled like a log upon his bed, where he slept the sleep of untroubled nature until noon.

CHAPTER XIII.

It had been intensely hot all day. The October sunshine poured down like a flood of molten brass, until the parched earth turned away, and only slanting rays were left to steal across its face. There had been a cool spell with a timid frost a few days before, that made the present heat seem all the more unbearable. As the first sunset breeze floated across the river, it fluttered the dusty ribbons on the hat of a tired, panting woman, and swept across her moist face like blessed balm.

"Ah, that good!" the woman sighed. She put the two worn satchels she carried, down upon the road side, and turned her face to catch the soft breeze in all its refreshing gentleness.

She looked about her with the glance of one who has been away and is glad to be back once more and find everything just as it should be. It was all there, all that she expected; the narrow, dusty roadway with its wide, deep field of drying stalks and snowy, drooping cotton on the one hand, and the ditch bank hidden by rank vegetation, shoulder high, on the other. Even the bob-white calling in the wild coffee over the levee, was just as it was every fall when she came. The golden-rod and purple astors on the ditch bank stood stately and radiant, challenging the cotton across the way to hold as high a head as they, nodded gorgeous plumes at Omene as the evening zephyrs stirred their foliage, and the lower ageratum, only half as tall, looked up and waved her pretty blue blossoms in welcome; her statlier cousin inclined her fragrant white tufts, and gave up a portion of her sweets for the returned wanderer's joy.

Omene Kirrch loved it all, and breathed in the wild flowers' perfume with a sense of gladness that she was with it now, once more. A gentle smile flitted over her yellow face; she picked up her satchels and trudged on upon her way.

She presently left the main road through Lilyditch, and taking a turnrow, soon came in sight of the house she was seeking; the large cabin to the right, standing near the bank of a little bayou that wound through the plantation and lost itself, few people knew where. It was the narrow beginning of this stream that gave the place its name. Before it left the woods, it turned and twisted there, serpent like, in the shadow of the moss-hung trees, and all its length was filled with thick-set **p**der lilies, spreading their fragrant, long-legged cups to catch the sunshine as it filtered through the great branches overhead.

Yes, Omene loved it all; the cotton-fields, the wild flowers, the waving grey moss, the white spider lilies and everything that was a part of her adopted home. She loved its very name; its softly flowing syllables reminded her of her native tongue, and she loved Louisiana's sunny skies because nowhere else were they so clearly blue.

In her roving she had become familiar with the state's physiography from its most northern boundary, on along the mighty river, to the salty sands of the gulf. She had trodden the ground and wandered between the bayous and lakes that surrounded Durieux' old home in the south, and the cotton-fields of the north. From the black buckshot soil of the alluvial east, she had wandered through the dark mud of the swamps, where the undergrowth of the woodland, made up of matted vines and impenetrable canebrakes, formed a jungle so dense that only the skillful hunter, in quest of the remaining beast of prey lurking in its

depths, dared penetrate. On past the haunts of the deer and past the lakes whose sparkling waters, veiled over with disc-leaved water lilies and their showy blossoms, reflected the blue of summer skies, or later held up brown well filled challices ready above the icy waters for the wild ducks that came with muttering wings to rest and feast in seclusion upon their chilled placid bosoms. Past all these to the red clay hills, where the pine trees sway above ferns that lift broad feathery leaves beside the thread-like streams watering their dark roots and the scanty tufts of grass or scattered weeds that find nourishment in the sandy, pebble filled soil.

There was hardly a nook in the scores of parishes that Omene had not visited during the long years she plied her trade and sought the section most promising of financial success. This section she believed she had found; the country that surrounded Sigma and Asola was now what she called her headquarters, and from the time the first gin whistle's shrill notes split the autumn air until the last bale of cotton was shipped, she worked at her business closely, going when the season was done to the city, where companionship of her own class could be found, or to the uplands where cold springs bubbled with health giving waters, but she never left Louisiana.

This slightly built, wiry woman, with a skin as dark as a mulatto's yet with nothing else but her coloring to suggest African blood, was almost forty years old. Her long black hair, straight and glossy, was neatly kept; her lips were red, and her straight thin nose was regular and well proportioned to her slender body.

She never spoke of her past voluntarily, and when asked about it smiled frankly, as if there was nothing to tell. She said she came from Syria and landed in New Orleans twenty years ago. There her uncle met her

and took her to his house until she learned to speak the two important languages of the city. By that time she had worked at various employments and had saved a little money of her own; and then, yielding to the dictates of her roving nature and partly persuaded by a friend, she invested her savings in a few cheap trimmings, some needles and thread, and putting these into a satchel, she started forth. Finding the work congenial she had followed it ever since.

That she had made money, the Syrian never acknowledged. She always wore plainest clothing, and her old satchel with its worn corners and rusty sides did not proclaim prosperity. She admitted that she had saved money and sent for her young brother, and after he arrived provided him with a pack of goods. She sent the young fellow to school during the summer, and in the busy season he shouldered his pack and was her companion in her trips from cabin to cabin.

She meant to open a house some day when Shibli was old enough to care for the business and manage affairs, and Omene knew where she would get the money for the enterprise. She would send for her children then too, perhaps, if they would come, but they were both grown women, now, and might refuse to leave the grandmother they knew for the mother who was a stranger. She would have Shibli settle in a store, but as for herself she knew that no four walls could hold her restless being for many months at a time.

It was twilight when Omene Kirrch arrived at her destination, and the odors of good homely fare arising from the cabin made her footsteps quicken. She was tired and hungry, and the savory smell of frying meat was delicious. A pack of dogs bounded from under the gallery as the peddler laid her hand upon the little yard gate, and a loud barking was begun which quickly

changed into yelps of delight as the Syrian's sweet, musical voice called the old greeting they knew so well. As she entered and walked toward the steps, the dogs frisked about her, springing up almost to her shoulder in welcome, receiving her caresses in a frenzy of glee.

The noise made by the dogs awakened an old woman from a twilight nap in the darkness of the house, and she came stumbling toward the door to inquire the cause of the uproar there; she too changed from sentiments of suspicion to those of pleasure.

One look was enough to convince the old darkey who the new comer was. Stopping her broad personage in the doorway, she placed her arms akimbo and with a generous smile of welcome upon her countenance, she shouted:

"Ella, come here! What you reckon! If here ain't Miss Meny come back jest as natchul as ever!"

Ella left her biscuit dough in a heap upon the board, and came running with floury fingers to better hear what her grandmother was saying. She was even more overjoyed than her grandmother at Miss Meny's return, and, taking the two satchels from her, she followed her into the house, talking as she went.

"Here's your room all ready for you, and ain't nobody slept in it since you was here. Grandma jest made me sun the bed and things day 'fore yestiddy, cause she said: 'Ella, you get things ready, cause I boun' Miss Meny'll be back before the week's out,' and sho 'nough, here you is."

All joined in the laughter of mingled pleasure and embarrassment engendered by newness of friends meeting again. The colored girl ran to the pump for fresh water for her guest to drink and to bathe her warm, dusty face.

"Make yourself comfortable now, Miss Meny," Ella said, bustling about and bestowing all the little atten-

tions in her power. She started back to her work, saying gaily as she reached the door:

"I'll run now and git supper, 'cause I knows how Miss Meny is. Miss Meny always ready for her supper, ain't you, Miss Meny?" and with another burst of laughter, she hurried back to the kitchen.

As Ella promised, she soon had the meal ready. She set a tiny table with the accessories for one person, and after everything was placed upon it, clean and appetizing, though coarse, the peddler took her place and fell to partaking of the repast with an avidity that amply repaid the girl for the extra trouble she had taken.

While Omene was enjoying her supper, the old woman and the girl seated themselves near, and old Harmony began to retail the news of the neighborhood with great zest. As she recounted everything that had happened during the Syrian's absence, her husband and sons came in, but they only entered the dining room out of curiosity when they heard lively voices there, and after saying "Howdy," they went out to the front gallery to wait for their supper until the white woman had eaten hers.

The dining room in old Aunt Harmony's cabin was like every other part of the house, as clean as broom, scrubbing brush and dust cloth could make it, and in this respect differed widely from the average negro's abode. There was nothing in the minature apartment but the table, which could seat but two persons at a time, a small safe, and three or four chairs. It was only used upon special occasions or when boarders chanced along.

Every peddler knew the house and knew that it had begun its existence as the usual double or two-room cabin, and afterwards had been added to from all sides, until now it contained eight rooms in all. They knew, too, that old Mingo Green and his family were emi-

nently respectable colored citizens; the former being an elder in the church and also a carpenter of some skill and experience. Everybody liked Aunt Harmony well; there was a good deal of her to like, too. Her two hundred pounds of solid brown covered flesh, seemed filled with only the best intentions toward every one. Charity and goodness of heart were her prevailing traits, and no one, white or black, ever lay upon a sick bed within her neighborhood without experiencing some kindly ministration of physic, nourishment or cheer from her hands.

It was ten years ago that Omene Kirrch first made Aunt Harmony's acquaintance. The occasion was one evening when she chanced upon the cabin, hungry and exhausted from a long tramp and asked to stay all night. From that time she was a regular patron of the cabin whenever happening near it at nightfall; and then it came to be that whenever she was not too tired to reach the house, she always went there for her night's rest. It was she who suggested to Uncle Mingo that he build more rooms to his house, and that they make a habit of entertaining white travelers who came that way.

As a rule there is nothing under the sun that a negro so abominates, so scorns, as "po' white trash," or any white person who puts himself upon social equality with their race, but somehow the Greens never looked upon "Miss Meny" in that light. They knew that she was not "quality," of course, but they always treated her with respect, and they liked her genuinely.

As Omene began to talk more and eat less, showing that her healthy appetite was appeased, her attention was suddenly arrested by the cry of a little child in the adjoining room. She looked up quickly.

"Ah, Ella," she inquired musically, "your baby? I had forgot you have one baby! Let me see?"

The girl went into the next room and brought her boy, just awakened from a late nap, and held him out for inspection proudly. She had hastily washed his face and put a fresh white slip upon him that made his bright little face gleam all the browner by contrast. His short hair stood in close crisps, like spun jet, all over his head. He was a fine little fellow, plump and lively, with great round eyes that were a miracle of the whitest white and blackest black. He was just ten months old, and being the child of one who was little more than a child, for Ella was barely seventeen at his birth, he was as sunny tempered and playful as a happy kitten.

Every clean baby darkey and every baby pig has a charm all his own. Both look so thoroughly animal and lift such questioning flat-nosed little faces, that one involuntarily wishes they might always be kept in their pristine state of innocence. There is something so independent, too, about them both; so sublimely indifferent to all earthly struggles and woes.

Miss Meny held up her hands to the pretty child, and with a crow he sprang into her arms, and was folded tightly to the hungry heart of the lonely peddler. If Omene had a weakness, it was for children; she petted all who came within her reach, and perhaps there was something in this happy child's dark laughing face and round chubby limbs that reminded her of the babies she had once hugged close to her bosom in the long ago. Omene never spoke of her husband except to say that he was dead, but the little children she had borne and loved were often recalled in her talk.

While the three women were playing with the baby, and laughing at his cunning little tricks, Ella heard a well known sound. A whip-poor-will, rather uncommon though it is, was sometimes heard calling from the trees near the cabin. The girl lifted her head and lis-

tened without attracting attention, and again the soft low call was heard. She arose and went quietly from the room, passing around the back way, and was soon under a large cottonwood that stood a hundred yards or so from the house on the bayou bank. As she drew near, a figure glided out into the twilight and taking the girl in his arms, kissed her fondly.

"Oh Burrill," she cried, "I'm so glad you come! You ain't been to see me for most a week." Ella returned his caresses warmly, and then questioned: "What made you whistle? Why didn't you come on to the house?"

"Miss Meny has done come back."

"La, how did you know?" she asked in surprise.

Burrill laughed. "I seen her through the window; she was eatin' her supper."

"Ain't she lookin' well? Burrill, she took on mightily over the baby," the girl added proudly. "She say he's the prettiest colored child she ever seen in her life."

"She's mighty right there, too," the man returned emphatically.

The two sat down on the ground beneath the tree and talked for some time, then the girl started up.

"I must go," she said, "or grandma will think I don't 'low to help her wash up the dishes tonight. Come on to the house. I ain't had my supper yet and we can eat together."

"All right," he said, catching her hand and gently pulling her back to her place beside him. "I'll go, but don't hurry, darlin', I want to talk to you some more out here first, it's so nice and cool out here. Honey," he went on, after she was again seated, "I got to get you to attend to somethin' for me. I got to send you—"

"Oh, Burrill!" the girl cried reproachfully. "You promised you wouldn't ever ask me to do that again!"

"Well, but, pretty thing, I can't help it. I'm 'bliged to have you," he coaxed.

"Get one of the men."

"Dog gone the men! They ain't any of 'em got sense enough to git out of the rain!"

"Darlin', why don't you stop this whole 'spisable business?" Ella asked coaxingly.

The man sat in moody silence, twisting one thumb around the other, thoughtfully.

"Burrill, I got to go. Grandma'll be callin' me." Again she started up, but Burrill caught her dress and prevented her rising. He twined his arms about her and drew her upon his knees. He kissed her tenderly, passionately, and called her by every endearing name he could think of, until she laughed happily. He held her close to him, and when she had forgotten her distress of a few moments before, he asked gently:

"What time you goin' to start, precious?"

The girl raised her head from his shoulder where he had pressed it, and answered sullenly: "I ain't goin'."

"Well," said Burrill resignedly, after a pause. He raised Ella to her feet as he got up himself. "Goodbye then, darlin', I got to go. I was goin' to stay, but if I got to see one of the men, I got to get on back home tonight." He kissed her lovingly and turned to go, but the girl threw her arms around his neck and held him, pleading:

"Don't go—don't go yet! Just stay five minutes longer, Burrill, I ain't seen you for so long."

He returned her kisses warmly, but persisted: "I got to go, sweetheart, don't you see it's gettin' late?" He put her from him, but as soon as he released her she sprang back and clung to him as before. He pressed his powerful arms about her in a slow quivering embrace, and kissed her dark face on brow, cheek and neck, then again upon her lips, with all the strength

of his commanding nature. He felt her sink in his arms till her head lay in rest upon his breast. She sighed restfully, and closed her eyes.

"Burrill," she whispered, "if I do it this time, will you swear you won't ever ask me again?"

He raised her until she looked into his face.

"Ella, I ain't goin' to make you no more promises. You know I ain't a goin' to make you do nothin' against your will, bad as I needs you, but I'll just tell you; if you'll go this time, I'll give you anything you want."

"No you won't, Burrill."

"Yes I will, darlin'. Ask for anything in this world you want and I'll give it to you."

The girl looked keenly into the dear face before her, almost hidden by the coming darkness, and repeated sadly: "No you won't, Burrill."

"Now how do you know, precious?" he queried lightly, affecting not to understand her meaning.

"Because it's done been asked."

Burrill heard the quiver in her voice and knew that her lips were trembling. Again he pressed her to him and kissed her, but she pushed him back gently.

"Honey," he said solemnly, "I declare before God I'd marry you if I could, but you know I'm married by law to Martha, and she'd raise the devil if she knew how I love you."

"Well, you ain't livin' with Martha."

"I know I ain't, but she wouldn't let me live in any peace with you. She'd have the law on her side."

"Get a divorce," the girl said, tersely.

"Well, I might do that," he said reflectively. "But if I did, you know Sallie would raise Cain. Besides," he went on, sinking his voice, "Martha knows too much. What makes you keep botherin' yourself, Ella? You knows that I loves you better than anything on

earth, and gives you more than I ever gave any other woman in my life."

"'Tain't that I care so much. I'm satisfied when you come to see me as often as you can, but grandpa keeps worryin' hisself and letting the elders talk him into frettin' about it, till I don't have no peace."

"Don't you let what they say worry you one bit, darlin'; you know I'd marry you in one minute if it wasn't for Martha."

"I suppose it ain't never ocured to you to send Martha out of the way," she said bitterly. "One no 'count woman is worth twenty men, I reckon—"

"Hush, Ella," Burrill said quickly, "Some one might hear you. Come now, birdie, say what you want me to give you and you shall have it."

The girl was silent. She stood pressing her toe into the soft earth of a cotton row near the tree.

"Next to you," she said at last, "I want a horse and buggy of my own."

"Ah, that's the way I like to hear you talk! Say what you want, and get it, too. While you down in Vicksburg, you pick out the nicest horse and buggy you can find, and pay for it on the spot. I'll give you the money in the mornin' before you start."

The girl squeezed his arm rapturously, and laughed contentedly.

"I don't want no Vicksburg horse, though," she said presently. "I want old Uncle Jerry Smith's little bay mare. He's talkin' 'bout sellin' her. She's fine under saddle, and harness, too."

"Go over there then and get her now, so you can have her to ride in the mornin', and you can pick out your buggy and come back in it."

"That'll be just splendid! Wonder if Unc' Jerry's gone to bed yet?"

"No, I reckon not; it ain't late for him. What do Unc' Jerry want for her?"

"He say he'll take fifty dollars for her, cash."

Coleman stepped near enough to the tree to make it and his body appear as one in the faint lingering light, and taking off a belt he wore beneath his clothing, his sharp memory and sense of touch enabled him to count out the necessary amount of bill accurately, and these he handed in a roll to the girl.

"Thanky, sir, more'n a thousand times!" Ella said gratefully, putting the money away in her bosom. The two started then hand in hand in the direction of Jerry Smith's cabin, standing on a turnrow five minutes walk further front in the field.

"Ella," said Coleman as they walked along, "if I was you I wouldn't buy a right new buggy, you know, because people might think it funny how you could get a horse and buggy too, all of a sudden."

"That's so," she acquiesced.

"Of course, I've made a good crop, and anybody'd know I was able to give 'em to you but—"

"Um—hoo, yes, I know; it's better to be on the safe side."

When they drew near enough to the cabin to hear the family on the gallery talking, Burrill dodged behind a little log cotton-house, and Ella went on alone.

Her trade was quickly concluded, and old Jerry went with her to where the animal was secured by a rope tied to a stob driven into the ditch bank, and untying the knots, he handed the rope to her.

"You want to borry a saddle so you can ride her home, honey?"

"No, nem mind. I'll just ride her bareback that little way. I'd like to get a halter, though, if you can spare one."

"Son," said the old darkey to a boy who had followed them, with regret, to where the pet was tied, for he hated to see her sold, "Son, git Ella that bridle hangin on de side de chimney."

As they waited for the boy to return, Ella unnecessarily lied glibly: "I come for Betty tonight, so I could ride her up the river tomorrow to see my cousin. I won't be back till tomorrow night," she added, "but I'll ask grandpa to fetch the bridle back in the mornin'."

"That's all right, honey. I ain't afeerd o' not gettin' it back. Good night; I wish you a pleasant trip tomorrow."

Ella Green mounted her purchase with the activity of a cat, and started off briskly. She passed the cotton-house without turning her head, but as soon as she was far enough from the cabin for the tall cotton and the darkness to conceal her, she slipped down and waited for Coleman to come up with her, then together they walked on to Elder Green's house.

CHAPTER XIV.

Omene Kirrch was returned to what she called home, ready with closely packed satchels to resume her work. She was a week or two later than usual, on account of having been detained in New Orleans with Shibli, who was very ill; but she was come at last, and Shibli Saleem, the brother, would come, too, as soon as he was strong enough to bear his share of the burden. There was many a dime, now, to be picked up from cabin to cabin; for every darkey that was physically able, from the oldest to the little chaps who stood on tiptoe to reach the topmost bolls, was between the cotton rows from the drying of the dew to the setting of the sun, picking the beautiful fleece, with never a thought to its wondrous whiteness, nor its illimitable possibilities; snatching it from its stems and stuffing it into bags, that perhaps were once purely white in these same fields, with never a care, never an object, but to gather so many pounds per day and receive so much hard cash per hundred in emolument therefor.

The season was at its height, and Lilyditch gin was the scene of bustle and activity. The iron-covered engine-house, with its furnace glowing like a jewel, was sending its vitality through the pulsing belts and humming brushes; and up in the lint room the snow-flake fibre was issuing, fold upon fold, in thick widths, to be clutched up by black arms and thrown into the yawning press, whose jaws crushed together over the downy cud, and finally tossed it out again, a hard, iron-bound block, for other black arms to snatch aside and send tumbling down the incline upon the ground below. Amid all this buzz of machinery and human

industry, there was the air of leisure that is a part of the negro's social economy. Every man not caught red-handed in the act of labor, would have been supposed to be an individual with neither cause nor inclination for toil. He lounges around aimlessly, joking with his fellows, or whittling a stick; and if not seated or lying down, invariably leaning his loosely-adjusted anatomy against a wall, a post, or anything else that will afford him physical support and take the responsibility of sustaining his mortal part aside from his own exertions.

Mr. Barrett was seated upon his horse in the cotton yard, talking to the manager of Lilyditch, who stood, brush and pot in hand, marking bales of cotton, and between strokes of his brush directing the hauling of it over to the landing. From September to March there were few days of Mr. Barrett's life that were not fully occupied from sunrise to night. He took the marks of the cotton now, counted the bales, took the samples that Mr. McStea had put aside for him, and hurried away to Englehart, where the same duties awaited him, and must be accomplished before dark.

Indian summer prevailed in all its dreamy beauty. Its sun gleamed round and rosily through the smoky ether, and the wood was hiding behind this hazy autumnal veil, that it might flash forth in its new garb of crimson and gold, a dazzling surprise, when the first winter sun dispelled the mists of the Indian's traditional pipe of peace.

Mr. Barrett rode along the little bayou, and had almost reached the strip of wooded swamp that separated Lilyditch from Englehart, when he suddenly came upon a well-known figure, that had crossed the dried bayou and emerged through the willow saplings just in front of him. A gun was upon the man's shoulder, and trotting at his heels was another familiar figure—the personage of a lanky, underfed hound.

Mr. Barrett reined up his horse as soon as the huntsman crossed his path, and stared first at the negro and then at his faithful follower, the yellow dog. Everything about the former proclaimed contented carelessness, from the shapeless old hat upon his head—sunburned beyond recognition of its former hue—on down the faded, ragged, patched clothing, to the rough shoes, that had never been blacked since the time they left the manufacturer's hands to the present day, when they clung to their wearer's feet, burst in almost every seam, and showing by bulges here and toe-shapes there that they had adapted themselves to the idiosyncracies of what they inclosed.

The longer Mr. Barrett sat and looked at the negro, the higher his usually placid temper rose, until his face flushed and the veins on his forehead stood out heavily.

The darkey touched his hat politely. Smothering an imprecation beneath his breath, Mr. Barrett said with his usual urbanity.

"Ah, Nathan, going hunting, I see."

"Yes 'r," the man returned cheerily. "I thought us'd enjoy a squ'r'l, or a 'possum, maybe, for our supper."

"Yes? How's your crop panning out? Have you finished picking cotton?"

Nathan shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and answered, contentedly:

"Well, sir, my crap's putty fair, but I ain't finished pickin' yet. Ain't got more'n three or four acres to pick out though."

The curb that Mr. Barrett had put upon his temper snapped like lightning, and he flashed out furiously:

"You confounded black rascal! Do you mean to tell me that you have something like three bales of cotton in the fields yet, and you out here piking around after an abominable little squirrel?"

Nathan again shifted his weight, and scratched his head in perplexity.

"Boss," he began, slowly, "didn't us settle up our 'count at our las' ginnin'?"

"Yes!"

"Boss," he again questioned meekly, casting his eyes up sideways at Mr. Barrett. "Boss, us—er—Boss, I don't *owe* you nothin', do I? Didn't my las' ginnin' pay all my lan' rent an'—a—all the grub I got too?"

Mr. Barrett looked down into the darkey's humble countenance. The corners of his mouth twitched, and with difficulty he suppressed his laughter as the philosophy of the negro's point of argument flashed upon him. Bull, who had pricked up his ears and looked from Mr. Barrett to his master, and back again, when the first angry words left the former's lips, had satisfied himself that there was no quarrel on hand, and after yawning twice, settled himself for a nap.

Nathan still looked into his master's face for an answer. Mr. Barrett allowed himself to smile, and said:

"No, sir; you do not owe me a cent. And I suppose if it suits you to let your cotton hang in the field until the rains beat it out upon the ground, I have no right to complain. It simply leaves your pocket and fertilizes my land." He waved his hand toward the woods. "Go ahead; if it isn't squirrel or 'coon today, it will be whisky later on. Your wife and children will at least share your supper." He laughed, and added: "Good-by, Nathan. I wish you luck."

The happy-natured negro grinned broadly. "So long, Boss. Much obleeged to you."

Nathan looked after Mr. Barrett, with a puzzled expression clouding his countenance, until he was out of sight. He aroused his dog, by and by, with a merry whistle, and the two plunged into the woods.

Mr. Barrett rode on his way, muttering below his

breath: "Blessed race—living literally after one, at least, of Christ's holy ordinances." He shook his reins and murmured: "'Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and thieves break in and steal.'"

Mr. Barrett was detained at Englehart until late, and it was almost midnight when he again entered Sigma; and as he did so, he was nearly run into by some excited negroes who were rushing toward the end of the village he had just passed through.

* * * * * *

When Sigma was put upon rollers and dragged piecemeal from the caving bank of the encroaching river, some fifteen years ago, it was located in an old field, and, as it happened, near the gin house; and this building, after the lands about it were divided into town lots, gradually fell into disuse. The boiler and gin-stand were taken away and sold, and the old weather-beaten building stands there still, used as a hay-loft sometimes, and as a resort for the negroes' favorite sport—the illicit game of craps. Time and again the District Attorney secured the participants of an unusually audible game, and those who did not have the requisite ten dollars to appease the parish's laws, had the privilege of boarding at the parish's expense for thirty days. Yet with the jail doors always yawning between the negro and the crap-table, the latter had its coterie of professional votaries and its group of sometime players, with no abatement of members. The old disused gin-house was an admirable nook for such secret conclaves, and became a regular resort for nightly meetings.

It was Saturday night, and one after another the men began dropping in at "Ol' Aunt Ginnie's," as they facetiously called the den. The few candles upon the table threw a ghostly gloom about the dark

walls of the big room. The table, the size of an ordinary dinner-table, was constructed of boards from packing boxes, and had a slender strip nailed around the edge to keep the dice from falling off. Over this was spread an old blanket, and the candles were stuck upon it by means of their own melted grease.

The wind whistled through the cracks in the walls and made the candle flames leap and flutter, and giant shadows of the men danced upon the sombre walls, like distorted demons over a newly-descended soul. Every now and then a boisterous "Hyah, hyah, hyah!" of laughter rang through the old building, and between each shout the thrower's voice was heard.

"Gim me room here, gentl'men," he probably says first, and then picking up the dice, he steps back, with one foot planted before the other, and bending eagerly forward, he swings his whole arm, and with a lurch of his loosely-jointed shoulders, he rolls the dice from his hand, calling:

"Comin' to git you!"

The dice fall with ten up, and he picks them up with a flourish.

"Gentl'men, make dat ten for a quarter! Shoot 'em agin! Let 'er roll! Come ten! Got you faded! Seven or 'leven! Craps!!"

"Hyah, hyah, hyah!"

There were all ages and sizes of men standing around, playing, watching the play, betting, swearing, and using profane words with the lavishness that only a negro can enjoy, unprovoked by other than strong emotion.

When the sport was at its height Allen Whitney sauntered in, and stood looking over a friend's shoulder. He stood for some time, with his hands in his pockets, looking on, but he declined to play, or to bet on those who were doing so.

Every one present seemed to have money. They had all been picking cotton, or ginning, and had been paid off that evening after sundown, for their week's work.

The stakes were large and the game intensely exciting, and Allen's attention was fixed upon a big burly negro, a stranger to him, who seemed to be playing with unusual luck. He had been winning at a rate of three times to five, but it had come to the point where he won at almost every throw. This man, two other strangers, and Burrill Coleman were doing the principal betting, though others joined, now and then, when the stakes were not too high. Allen was standing between Coleman and the lucky negro, who seemed to be named "Buck;" and he could see that Burrill was steadily losing his temper as his money changed hands.

He threw another twenty-dollar gold piece upon the table, and with an oath more violent than any he had uttered yet, he exclaimed:

"Win that too, you ——."

"Just as you say, Mr. Coleman," the other negro returned, blandly, showing his teeth in a sardonic smile.

"Give me room, gentl'men. Let her roll! Jim Hicks! Comin' to git you! Make that six agin, Mr. Coleman! Come six! Ah!"

Allen, watching the throws with every faculty strained to that end, saw the six come, as the man had announced, with never a crap intervening. He turned to Coleman, yelling in excitement:

"Good God, Burrill, that nigger's ringin' in hosses on you!"

"What!" Coleman sprang at his adversary with uplifted fist, but the negro was too quick for him. He evaded Burrill's descending blow, and before any one,

least of all his victim, could divine his intention, he snatched a razor from his bosom, and springing upon Allen, cut his throat so horribly that the poor boy sank upon the ground unconscious, covered with his own warm blood.

Coleman was so staggered by the turn affairs had taken that he could scarcely believe his senses. Allen's friends disarmed the strange negro and bound him with a rope some one secured while the others were wresting the razor from his grasp.

Coleman went up to him and glared furiously into the equally infuriated face of the murderer.

"You —— ——— *fool!* Ain't there no sense in your blasted head? What good are you now?"

"Ah," cried one of his captors, "Mr. Coleman, he's all the good. If Allen Whitney dies—and God only knows what's to keep him from it—this devil-nigger will find hisself between daylight and a piece of hemp, sho as I live to talk before a jury."

"Yes, Lawd!" came in chorus from the crowd.

Coleman looked about him. Only Allen Whitney's friends and the captive remained. The other two strangers had gone, and he, too, passed out of the house. Just outside the door he met old Dr. Smith coming hurriedly, and behind him was Allen's mother, and several women who came running, partly from curiosity, partly from interest in the injured boy.

The women ran shrieking into the gin, and the doctor stopped.

"Is he still alive?"

"Yes sir," Coleman answered. "He's breathing yet. Doctor, for God's sake, keep him alive! If Allen was to die," he added more calmly, "I'd blame myself all the rest of my life. I'm goin' for Dr. Allison, now, to help you. Stay with him, Doctor, as long as he's breathin', and I'll pay you for every minute of your time."

Burrill hardly waited for the good old man's promise ; but rushed on, and reaching his horse, galloped to Englehart, and on through that place to Lawren's Station, covering the distance of fourteen miles in an incredibly short time.

* * * *

Allen did not die. His assailant was taken to jail in Asola, and as soon as Dr. Smith and Dr. Allison—whose united efforts saved his life—pronounced Allen out of danger, the negro's release was secured. But it was many a day, and only after careful nursing, that Allen returned to his work in the Barrett household.

CHAPTER XV.

When one man lies at the point of death, however anxiously his small world hangs upon the faintest changes in his condition, the other worlds that revolve around his, speed on, unchecked, in their appointed courses without knowledge or thought of the suspense in one isolated star.

While Allen was lying day after day in a seemingly hopeless condition, attended almost hourly by two of the best of physicians, and having delicacies sent to him from the Barrett kitchen to nourish his rapidly wasting body into strength to do battle with the hideous wound constantly menacing his life, the handful of humanity immediately surrounding his sphere was all that remembered the gin-house casualty or gave it more than a passing thought. From the beginning of the cotton season until its end there is a steady flow of business interests that absorbs events and defies personal interruption or individual suffering. When King Cotton and his high minister, Prince Seed, reign, all social crises save birth and death are forced to wait.

Business resulting from an unusually good crop was occupying every one, and old Mr. Chaffin of Willowburn was pretty tired when Saturday night came; and glad enough when it seemed that at last the negroes had quit straggling in, and he could close the store and betake his tired body to bed. It was no light work to stand behind the counter of a plantation store all day long, and cater to the whims of negroes, many of whom were half drunk; besides the task of watching all parts of the room at once to see that no stealing was done, and through all this, to keep down difficulties between

customers that threatened to bring razors or pistols into use.

Mr. Chafin was long past his youth, and though still active and in excellent health, he was usually too fatigued when night came to care for much but dreamless, refreshing sleep. He had been at Willowburn two years and liked his work, but found the place oppressively lonely at times. He longed for his wife and children to cheer him in his struggle for their support. He was a good man; gentle, kind and indulgent. Far too indulgent, some of his friends thought when they contemplated his wife's life of ease in the city, and thought of the lonely husband and father toiling in the plantation store, remote from all white associates.

As Mr. Chafin decided that his day's work was done, and was barring the windows and door, he heard footsteps sound upon the gallery and a tap upon the front door.

"Wait a minute, Mister," a negro's voice called outside, "wait a minute." Mr. Chafin opened the door again and a negro walked up to the part of the counter that served as a bar, and threw a dollar down upon it. Mr. Chafin gave the man the whiskey he asked for, and while he was drinking this, two others lounged in and joined the first who invited them to drink with him.

All three were strangers to Mr. Chafin; the first man who entered had come into the store during the afternoon and purchased a can of salmon and some crackers, which he ate leisurely near the stove; but the other two had never been there before that he knew of.

It was very cold and a slow drizzling rain had been falling since dusk that seemed to pierce one to the very marrow with its icy breath. Mr. Chafin washed the glasses the darkies used and put them back in their places upon the shelf, and was not

surprised as he did so that the men went up to the stove and stood warming themselves by its comforting heat. He finished putting away the bottles of liquor and went to the stove too, where he held out his thin blue-veined hands to be warmed. The three negroes were looking about the store in idle curiosity as they stood in silence, and the old gentleman said kindly :

“ You fellows don’t live around here, do you ? ”

“ No sir,” the man who came in first replied. “ We’s just over here on a little business.”

The men still lingered near the heater, turning first one way and then another until the steam, accompanied by the invariable ill odor, arose from their damp clothing.

The store on Willowburn was a very small affair, scarcely more than twenty by forty feet, and in the back was a small compartment cut off for the storekeeper’s use as a bed room ; yet small as it was, there was a good business done there, and often there was as much as a hundred or two hundred dollars taken in on a brisk Saturday. There was no other store within five miles of it, and the darkies on two or three adjoining plantations congregated there at the close of each week to spend their cash and carouse with their friends.

Mr. Chafin, as he stood giving the darkies a chance to warm themselves thoroughly before he turned them out into the cold, fell into a light reverie from which he was recalled violently by finding himself surrounded by three unknown men, each with a cocked revolver within two feet of his head. He was so astonished that he stared before him dazed, realizing slowly the fact that he was utterly helpless. He dropped his hands at his sides and looked at the three villians surrounding him calmly, though his heart was beating

deafeningly and the blood rushed to his brain so fast that thinking seemed an impossibility.

Like a flash, recollection of the atrocious murders that had filled the papers of his native state for the past few weeks recurred to his mind, and he recognized that he was in the identical position that the men in the counties across the river were when they lost their lives. He wondered if he were dreaming. He had read the accounts of robbery and murder, as they appeared in the daily papers, with such horror, that he believed he must be dreaming that he was one of the men who had been killed.

The man who came first, and whom the other two called "Buck," laughed.

"You see ole man," he said, "we's got de drop on you. Hit ain't no use fur you to kick. Dick, go lock dat do'."

"Hyah, hyah, Buck, you must take me fur a baby. I done dat when I fuss come in."

"What do you purpose doing?" asked Mr. Chafin slowly.

"Just keep your mouth shet; you'll soon fine out. Here boys," Buck went on, "'tain't no use a all o us pintin our pistol at him; you all keep him quiet while I gits de money. He ain't got no pistol on 'caze hits 'hind de counter by the cash draw an' I borried his knife dis evenin'. Bud, if you wants to, you kin pick out a overcoat you said you wanted. Dick kin keep de ole man's mouth shet."

"I wants a pair pants," muttered Dick.

"No you don't," asserted Buck. "You don't want no bundles in your way." Saying this he turned toward the cash drawer and secured what money was in it. Putting it into his pocket he came back to Mr. Chafin.

"Come, ole man, they ain't enough money here.

You must a slipped some of it into de safe today whilst I wasn't a lookin'. Come, get it out quick; we got to hurry!"

"I refuse to open the safe," said Mr. Chafin firmly.

Buck stared at him in amazement and then broke out into an uproarious laugh.

"Well I'll be dog goned! Come here, Bud; he say he ain't a goin' to open de safe!"

"Why Mister," said Dick in remonstrance, "you can't he'p yourse'f." Three pistols were again leveled at the poor old man's head.

His wife, his children, his grand-children! But for one chance to see them all once more! Silently he took the key of the little safe from his pocket and held it out. Buck took it and went to the back of the room where the safe stood, removed the money it contained and returned to his companions, leaving the iron door swinging open.

"Come ahead, boys," he said, "we got to be goin'."

"Let him git his hat, Buck, 'tain't no use carryin' him out in de col' like that," said Bud, speaking for the first time.

"Go git it then," said Buck. "Hit's hangin' up in his room nigh de do'."

Bud went into the little room where Mr. Chafin's bed stood, and took the hat down from its peg. Noticing that an overcoat hung beside it, he hastily snatched it down also and went back to the store. Without a word he put the hat upon Mr. Chafin's head and held the coat ready for him. Mr. Chafin adjusted his hat and thrust his arms into the sleeves of his coat, the man assisting him with a deftness that showed him accustomed to the service. When the coat was on, Mr. Chafin turned to him and said with his gentle simplicity:

"Thank you."

"You welcome, sir," muttered Bud, buttoning to his chin the new overcoat he had selected from the stock on the shelves.

Buck moved toward the door.

"Will you kindly tell me where you intend taking me?" Mr. Chaflin asked when they had reached the gallery and Buck closed the door.

"We just goin' to take you up de road a little piece and leave you."

"Why do you not leave me here; my friends will at least find me, then?"

"That's just 'zactly what's de matter. We don't keer 'bout you bein' found till we's outter de way."

The men started forth in the cold rain, stumbling through the mud, and keeping their prisoner well guarded in their midst. It was not very dark, and as the party became accustomed to the change from lamp light to the moon's dimmed rays, objects could be discerned distinctly enough to guide them on their way. They trudged along the lonely road silently for nearly half a mile, when suddenly Buck paused, drawing the rest with himself into the shadow of the trees.

"Who is dat ahead of us?" he whispered. "Hush, be still!"

The person approaching drew nearer, and for the first time Mr. Chaflin's heart gave a bound of hope. In the faint light he recognized the man approaching as one of the tenants on Willowburn; a strong, active young fellow, who prided himself upon his prowess as a wrestler and boxer. As Mr. Chaflin recognized him, each of his captors uplifted his pistol, and one of them was leveled at himself while the other two were aimed at the new comer.

"Halt!" commanded Buck.

"Hello, what's the matter here? Good Lawd, Mr. Chaflin, is that you?"

"Yes, Rich, I am in the hands of these robbers, as you see."

"My Lawd! Why—"

"Here, cheese your racket," commanded Buck. "Fall into line ef you don't want your brains blowed out."

"Better tie them fellows together," suggested Dick. "I got de rope here." The negro produced a strong slender cotton rope and first tied the mulatto's hands behind him, then Mr. Chaffin's, linking the two together. The men moved on, slowly, through the deep mud. Several cabins with no lights, or sign of wakeful life visible were passed, but each time that one came in sight the revolvers were placed at the captives' heads. Another half mile was gone over in this way. The rain ceased to fall and the clouds slowly drifted apart, making the way lighter and less difficult.

Mr. Chaffin's brain had cleared and he was determined to make a struggle for his life, yet he saw no way to extricate himself and his fellow sufferer from the dangerous position. He managed to stumble and fall up against Rich, with his mouth close to the darkey's ear.

"Keep up your courage. I see some one coming," he whispered.

He was right. Another man was coming toward them and he too, like Richard, was halted as soon as he was within reach of the pistols. It was a negro well known to both Mr. Chaffin and the darkey, and he in turn was astonished and alarmed by the crowd before him. Again Mr. Chaffin stumbled.

"Now's our chance, watch!"

"All right, I'm loose."

Rich was loose. He had ingeniously held his hands, while they were being tied, in such a way that it was an easy matter to undo Dick's bungling knots, and he

had also managed to get his knife from his hip pocket and open its three-inch blade. He still held the rope in his hands so that he was seemingly as helpless as when first bound.

The new addition to the party was a strong, able-bodied negro, too; but he was frightened out of his wits, and he failed to see the advantage his presence might be to the two men, who seemed to be completely cowed.

Buck spoke less boldly when he ordered the third prisoner to take his place beside the others, and Rich was quick to detect the change. He, too, had had time for reflection, and he knew that life was too dear to be given up without a struggle. The new man was pushed into place beside the mulatto, and the three ruffians took up stations behind, with pistols cocked, ready for use, in their cold, stiffened hands.

Buck held a brief consultation with his partners, and following their mumbled replies, he commanded the party to turn from the road, to the right, and follow the cotton rows leading toward the woods.

The frost and rain loosened soil of the field was almost impassible. The men sank in the mud above their ankles at every step. Rich stumbled against the friend at his side, whom the others had not dared to tie, and muttered:

"Get ready to fight!"

With these words, he wheeled about, plunged his knife into Dick, the villain nearest him, striking him backward into the mud.

Mr. Chafin had by this time succeeded in extricating his hands from the rope, and being on the alert, he grabbed Dick's pistol as he fell, and tried to empty its contents into the leader's head, but Buck was too quick for him. He was taken aback by Rich and Mr. Chafin's rapid action at first, and thereby lost his chance of overpowering them.

Dick lay in the mud, wounded in his side, and Bud, firing his pistol wildly, turned and ran toward the wood, leaving Buck nothing else to do but follow his example; and this he did, darting back to the road, with Mr. Chafin pursuing him as best he could; but Buck's younger limbs did his bidding, and diving into the thicket of willows along the edge of the bayou, he was soon lost, and Mr. Chafin was compelled to give up the pursuit. The old man turned unwillingly and retraced his steps to where he had left his companions, and there, to his chagrin, he found that Dick, too, had been allowed to escape.

Rich stood excitedly talking over the the part he had taken in the encounter from the time he met Mr. Chafin and his would-be assassins, and the other negro was still so frightened that he scarcely knew what he was doing.

When Mr. Chafin rejoined them, baffled and distressed at not recovering the money, yet, withal, thankful that his life was spared, there was nothing to be gained by lingering in the cold.

"Come, boys," he said, "I am terribly shaken up. Come on to the store, where we can get warm and dry once more."

CHAPTER XVI.

For several weeks prior to the robbery of Mr. Chaffin the newspapers had reported instances of robbery and murder committed in the counties across the river, which the Louisianians read with interest and regret; but it was not until a robbery and like murder was attempted in their own midst that public sentiment was aroused to the fullest. Mississippi seemed infested by a gang of well-organized ruffians, whose deeds were so carefully executed that no trace of the perpetrators could be followed up. In each instance the crime was committed in an isolated store, but never in the same locality twice, and always the man or men who slept in the stores that were robbed were found dead upon the floor next morning by the first customer who chanced that way. This thing went on, causing more distress and alarm as the weeks merged into months, until it culminated in the murder of a gentleman so highly esteemed and so well connected by blood and business interests with the best in the country, that the state authorities fully awakened to the exigency of some decided step, and every effort was put forward toward catching the gang, or at least its leaders.

It was generally supposed that the atrocious crimes were committed by negroes, as strange darkies were always seen in the vicinity during the day that preceded the crime, but the men who might have identified the murderers were always left dead or in a speechless, dying condition.

Following the excitement caused by the murder of Mr. Beresford, several arrests of suspicious characters were made, and one of these, turning state's evidence,

gave the names of two or three other negroes whom he swore were the organizers and leaders of the murderous band of robbers.

This confession was made only a few days after Mr. Chafin's narrow escape with his life, and the news of it reached Sigma when the robbery at Willowburn was creating no small amount of interest.

Jules Durieux and Arthur Wheeler, having ridden into Sigma together, where the matter was being thoroughly discussed, were dumbfounded upon their return to Englehart to find that during their absence Mississippi officers had arrived at the plantation, by way of Asola, and arrested Burrill Coleman on the charge of implication in the murder of Mr. Beresford.

Wheeler's indignation was unbounded, and he expressed himself in language rather more forceful than elegant.

"The idea of such a thing!" he said, thoroughly stirred, and not caring who heard him. "Burrill Coleman leader of a gang of Mississippi toughs! Why, I never heard of such a thing in all my life. Humph! next thing, Jules, I suppose, they'll come and arrest you as leader of the Mafia."

Durieux sat before the stove thoughtfully, punching into the coals with the poker. "There is simply a mistake, Arthur, that is all," he said.

The store porter, who had informed the gentlemen of the arrest, still stood there, waiting another chance to speak. "Mr. Wheeler," he said at his first opportunity, "Burrill got 'em to bring him by here, when they was startin', and he axed me to tell you an' Mr. Juror for God's sake to get him out o' this. He 'lowed you all knowed more about him than anybody else, an' could do him a powerful sight o' good ef you'll testify for him."

"Testify? I should say I shall!" Wheeler asserted.

"Why, I'll go to Vicksburg myself and prove that Burrill Coleman is an innocent man."

"You may go, now, Louis," said Durieux, quietly dismissing the porter. As soon as the darkey left the office and closed the door behind him, Durieux spoke again:

"This is a bad piece of business for Burrill," he said. "I am afraid there must be something wrong somewhere, or his name would not be implicated in this thing. Of course I believe he is all right, myself."

"I should say so! We know Burrill, and a better nigger never lived." Wheeler tilted his chair back and slapped his knee to give emphasis to his words. "Why, I would trust Burrill Coleman a sight further than I would many a white man I know who passes for a gentleman."

"Yes, *we* know Burrill, and think a mighty heap of him," Jules admitted, his dark eyes still gazing into the fire. "Our praises, though, I fear, won't go for much with the Mississippi officials," he added, twisting his mustache and biting off the ends thoughtfully.

"I don't purpose relying upon our praises nor my confidence in him to effect Burrill Coleman's release," Wheeler declared warmly. "Why, man, I've got proofs!" He jumped up from his chair. "Come here; I'll show you what can clear Burrill Coleman of all suspicion."

Jules followed Wheeler over to his desk, and both stood, while the latter pulled down his ticket ledger and rapidly turned the pages.

"There," he said triumphantly, pausing on a page, and running his finger down the column of dates. "There it is: Burrill Coleman, Nov. 25th, worked till 12 o'clock. Pretty good evidence in his favor, isn't it? Mr. Beresford was murdered on November 25th, at or near 10 o'clock, and Burrill Coleman is arrested as

being one of his murderers. Now if any one can prove to me that a man can work at a gin till 12 o'clock here, and then get to Leona, ninety miles distant, across a river, and without steamboat or railway to assist him, in time to commit a murder at 10 o'clock, then I'll freely confess I don't know anything about human possibilities. And, more than that," went on Wheeler, rapidly, "I can swear that I talked with Burrill about six o'clock that same Saturday. He had bought a pair of shoes for his wife—"

"Burrill claims that he hasn't any wife just at present," Durieux interrupted, smilingly.

"Well, he bought a pair of women's shoes, the best pair in the house, No. 4, anyway, and he brought them back to exchange for a pair of 3½. I noticed it particularly, as I didn't know there was a woman on the place with that small a foot."

"Well, I am certainly glad that you have this," said Durieux, tapping the book with a cigar he had taken out to light. "It worried me no little to have Burrill taken off the place this way. I have always liked him as a man and as a laborer. He has the knack of getting more work out of another darkey, too, than any man I ever saw, black or white. You know, a nigger just naturally hates to be bossed by another nigger, but Burrill can take a squad of hands and make things hum." Durieux laughed, and puffed at his cigar. "It's an actual fact—sometimes when I've wanted an extra amount of work done by a certain time, I've put Burrill to oversee the job, and gone on off, knowing he would get it done, if I couldn't."

"They all like Burrill, and seem to have a high regard for him," Wheeler said.

"Yes," drawled Durieux, "but do you know, I think there is a certain—a—well, fear, I suppose I must call it, mixed with their esteem?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Wheeler, who, now that Coleman was in trouble, was unwilling to review his shortcomings. "Burrill is right rough and dictatorial to men of his own color—that's just his way—but he is always as respectful and accommodating to white people as any body could desire."

The day for Coleman's trial came, and, busy as he was, and illy as he could be spared from his place behind the counter, Arthur Wheeler arose at three o'clock, while the world was still wrapped in the icy darkness of a coming winter's day, and putting his books in the buggy, drove over twenty-five miles of almost bottomless roads to testify where Burrill Coleman was on November 25th. He furthermore swore that the negro had worked on Englehart steadily throughout the year, with the exception of a day or two off, now and then, when he was laid up with toothache.

When Wheeler recrossed the river by ferry boat, and got into his buggy to return home in the afternoon, Burrill Coleman shared the seat in the buggy with him, and a more grateful being it had never been Arthur Wheeler's pleasure to see. The darkey seemed as though he could not do enough to show his thanks.

Wheeler was almost frozen after his long drive, and Dureiux, expecting that he would be thoroughly so, sat up in the office of the store to wait for him, with elaborate preparations in the way of hot supper, a warm room, and fresh clothes, all in order; and this, together with Burrill's humble and repeated expressions of thanks, made him sink to sleep, when he finally did get to bed, with some sort of vague idea that perhaps all the heroes, even if but on a small scale, were not dead yet.

From the time that apprehension was felt in Louisiana of robbery and murder in plantation stores,

Durieux and Wheeler used the utmost precaution toward protecting themselves and their employer's property. Durieux changed his sleeping apartment from the plantation residence to the store and, without desiring it generally known, shared Wheeler's bed with him.

The store on Englehart was a much nicer building than is usually seen in such out of the way places. It was built upon stout pillars, twelve feet from the ground, to insure against overflow in event the levees should break, and the lower portion was finished off as a wareroom. There was a gallery in front and at the back, and a long flight of steps leading to each of these two resting-places. The back portion of the store was divided into two rooms, serving as office and Wheeler's bedroom, the former opening on the back gallery.

The two young men, after discussing the danger of their position, had determined to guard against surprise. As time flew on, however, and nothing occurred to cause apprehension, they began to feel satisfied that their establishment was to be overlooked by gentlemen of color who made their living in such a precarious and illegitimate manner.

"It is my belief," said Durieux one day, "that in each case where there has been robbery, the store was closely watched, and the theft not accomplished until the rascals were sure that there was enough money in the house to warrant the danger."

"Yes, I have thought of that, too. I suspect our indemnity so far has been due to the fact that our income has not been just what the devils want at a haul. If our sales were what they were last year, and the year before, I guess we would have handed in our checks long ago. That was a wise thought of Mr. Barrett's, turning the bulk of the trade into the Sigma store."

"Then we have our safe, too."

"Yes, a big safe like that seems to fill a nigger with awe. They actually regard the mysterious way of opening it as a sort of witchcraft—real conjure work, in fact."

Durieux laughed. "Well, I don't care what makes them hesitate—conjure work or what—just so long as they hesitate long enough for us to save our heads."

The night following this conversation, after the store had been closed, and the young men were sitting by the stove for a last smoke before bed time, something happened which made them think their crisis had arrived.

Durieux had brought his razor into the office, and sat there sharpening it with extra care for use next morning, and Wheeler sat idly watching each flash of the bright blade, as it moved back and forth over the strop.

A heavy step came shuffling up to the front door, followed by a loud rap. The two young men exchanged glances and sat intently listening. The knocking was repeated loudly, but neither of them spoke. They waited in silence, and heard footsteps descending the front stair and after a while ascending that at the rear, which had its head at the office door. A hand was laid vigorously upon the door knob, and the door rattled violently as a man's voice without called:

"Mr. Wheeler! oh, Mr. Wheeler! Please, sir, let me in; I want some med'cin."

Neither Durieux nor Wheeler recognized the voice, and again exchanging significant glances, they waited. The door was a solid structure, with no crack that admitted of any one's looking into the office, and there was no other opening upon the gallery, except a window closed with a shutter of solid wood.

The noise and voice ceased for a few moments, and began again.

"Mr. Wheeler! oh, Mr. Wheeler!" the man outside called, and then there was a groan of pain. "Oh, Mr. Wheeler, please, sir, let me in."

"Hello there!" called Wheeler. "Who is that making that racket?"

"It's me, Mr. Wheeler. Let me in; I want some med'cin."

"Oh, is that you, Pete?" The two men listened, and the unfamiliar voice answered:

"Yes sir."

"Go along, then," commanded Durieux, gruffly. "I'm shaving Mr. Wheeler, and don't want to be bothered."

There was silence again, as Durieux thought there would be at mention of the razor, but only for a time, and the pleading began again, preceded by another deep groan.

"Please, sir, let me in. I got the misery so bad I'm 'most dead."

"Well, hold on, then, a minute," said Durieux. "Pete!" No answer. "Humph!" he muttered, "he's forgotten what his name was. Pete!"

"Yes sir," the voice groaned.

"Go look on the edge of the horse-trough, close by the pump, and you'll find that bottle of Mul-en-ol—the bottle of medicine I was using on the place where Mag cut herself in the wire fence. You know the one I mean; you saw me put it there. It's the best thing on earth for the 'misery.' Just take a teaspoonful in some water. Go on; you won't have any trouble finding it."

"Yes sir," he drawled reluctantly.

"Is the Mul-en-ol really there?" questioned Wheeler, in a whisper.

"Yes, it's there. I forgot to bring it in when I

finished doctoring the horse. He'll find it if he needs it."

"Mr. Wheeler—"

"Well?"

"Hit's dark out here. Please, sir, lend me a candle?"

"Aw, go to the devil!" thundered Durieux. "Didn't I tell you I was fixing to shave Mr. Wheeler and didn't want to be bothered? If I take a double-barreled shotgun to you, I reckon you'll leave."

Durieux strode across the room and snatched up a gun, which he allowed to strike the floor as he walked toward the door. But there was no occasion for his using it; footsteps shuffled down the stairway precipitately, which sounded as though made by more than one pair of feet, and there was profound silence, save the wind whistling around the corners of the house.

CHAPTER XVII.

“Christmas comes but once a year,
And ev’y nigger wants his sheer.”

And he generally gets it, too. Christmas is the greatest event of the whole twelve months; transcending all other days as a king transcends his subjects. The Fourth of July is all very well for a grand picnic, ice cream, and a big dinner, but it is not Christmas and there is only one period in the whole calendar which is.

For days preceding the twenty-fifth, the average darkey is in a state of radiant good humor and anticipation; planning how he is going to enjoy himself and what he is going to get for Santa Claus. He spends his cash as lavishly as a Cræsus, upon clothing, presents for his lady love, whiskey and craps, with a sublime disregard for the days that come after. He wakes up the morning before the great day, as happy as a bridegroom and as wealthy as a nabob if he has as much as twenty dollars to spend for things he can do without.

His idea of the best possible way to fill the thirty-six hours which, in his mind, comprise Christmas, is to get so gloriously drunk in the first place that he can shoot off his pistol and yell at the top of his voice without caring a snap who sees him or who hears him, and he takes dancing, eating, and fire-works incidentally. Everybody has a bowl of eggnog on tap from six o'clock until it gives out, and he, and she too, begins festivities by visiting his most intimate friend to sample his eggnog and catch him “Christmas-gif’,” and pretty soon he is launched upon his happiness.

The negro is not the only one, either, who feels to-

ward Christmas a passionate affection that no other anniversary can command. The "touch of nature that makes the whole world kin" has set its seal too ungrudgingly for the bond of unity to be ignored; and the illusive day, so crowded with reminiscences of joy, sorrow, hope and regret, so overflowing with good will and rejoicing that is often but a screen for unshed tears, comes, and all of us turn aside from our marked out pathway to clasp it; and when it has slipped through our fingers, like another bead in the rosary of memory, we take up our burdens once more and pursue our appointed course.

The day before Christmas, the Barrett household was in the season's usual flutter of industry and expectation. Mrs. Barrett, Nellie, and Lillie were darting here and there, busy with preparation, and the children were in a state of excitement that bordered on frenzy. They had not walked normally for a week, but bounded like toys, inflated with that ephemeral gas called hope. They skipped, hopped or ran, whichever, for the time being, afforded the best safety valve for overjoyed spirits' effervescence. They sang or hummed in that nerve twitching manner peculiar to childhood, until Nellie clapped her hand over her tortured ears, willing to compromise upon any price for peace and quiet.

Virgil and Stella held many secret conferences as to the probable gifts from old Santa Claus, and the various closely wrapped packages that from time to time were smuggled into the house, supposedly undetected by four keen bright eyes, were an unceasing source of speculation. Once or twice they succeeded in touching some of the mysterious bundles and boldly asked questions about them, but the answer was invariably a sharp command to "let that alone, it's lay overs to catch meddlers," and thwarted; they went at something else, disgusted.

"Oh shucks!" muttered Stella upon one of these occasions, as she shook herself indignantly and marched out of the room. The hot tears rushed into her eyes and her little lips quivered with wrath. It seemed terrible to have to live with people who treated her feelings with no more consideration than if she was a baby, and it seemed to her, with none of the petting and adulation that was a baby's due, and that she was, without knowing it, steadily outgrowing. A big tear gathered and dropped upon the hem of her soiled little apron, and she resolved that she would run away; would go out to Englehart to live with "Mr. Duwo." He had asked her to come and *he* at least loved her, she was sure, for he never, never refused to answer her questions.

She picked up her small, dirty sunbonnet from under a chair in the hall, and determined that she would go at once. She reached the back door and there she found her brother blockading the way. He was upon his knees driving tacks into the edge of the rug, which he had surreptitiously sneaked out of the store room, together with the hammer, while his mother and sister were in the pantry. The rug had curled along the edges and tripped him the day before, and he resolved that it shouldn't do it again. Stella marched up to him and commanded:

"Let me by, Birgil." The lump in her throat made her voice break, and the little boy looked up in surprise.

"Why sister, what's the matter?" he asked tenderly. "Who made you mad?"

The little fellow's sympathy, added to the sight of another big tear that fell just then, was more than Stella could stand, and she broke down completely.

"Oh brozzer," she sobbed, "ev'y body is so mean! Movver won't tell me nussin and sitter tweats me just

like I was a dog! Movver gets sings and gets sings, and she won't tell me what's in em, and ev'y time I asts her she just says 'Lay-overs-to-tatch-meddlers.' Do you weckon its lay-overs in *all* of em?"

Virgil scratched his nose with the head of a tack, thoughtfully.

"What do you reckon lay-overs looks like, sister?"

"I don't know," said the little girl with spirit. "If they'd just show me tome one time, I wouldn't bozzer to see 'em any more."

Virgil turned his blonde head and stared through the open doorway into the yard. "I wonder if they are to eat," he mused.

The words had scarcely left his lips when he bounded to his feet. "Whoopee, sister, Allen's getting ready to kill the turkey! Let's go see."

He dashed off toward the wood pile. Stella tossed her bonnet aside and flew after him, and together the two little savages, as blood thirsty as our aborigines, watched with intense interest the death throes of the poor bird destined for tomorrow's feast. If either of them at another time had found a baby turkey with a broken leg or a pecked head, it would have been nursed with the tenderest solicitude until it died and then found tearful burial in a corner of the garden, but the connection between a fowl dying from sickness or from some one's design had never yet occurred to them.

The children were in every body's way; wanting to beat eggs or run errands, and begging to scrape every icing dish or cake bowl as soon as it was emptied; compelling the greatest vigilance on the part of Mrs. Barrett and Nellie to keep the young tasters from foundering themselves before the great event for which all this cooking was intended, arrived. In their zeal to help, combined with sudden exuberance of feeling, several accidents happened.

Both children were expert dancers and possessed besides the ball-room acquirements learned from Nellie, many of the fancy steps that were among Lillie's accomplishments. These last they were often called upon to practice for the benefit of Nellie's guests, who delighted in having her play the queer timed nigger tunes and watching the children go through the quaint movements. They performed the evolutions, like the negroes, quite as skillfully to "patting" as to music, for it was to that method of keeping time that Lillie had taught them.

Nellie turned a beautiful white cake, as light as a feather, from the pan, and commented upon its merits so glowingly, amid general applause, that Virgil began to pat in expression of his admiration, and Stella, compelled to give vent to her feelings, hearing the familiar rythm, involuntarily commenced to "buzzard lope" with such animation that the pantry table shook, and crash! upon the floor went Mrs. Barrett's handsome crystal bowl—the one that was her mother's before hers—left by Lillie's carelessness too near the edge, in hopeless ruins.

No wonder that Mrs. Barrett, who was tired and nervous from her work and the children's noise, gave them each a rousing slap and sent them heart broken out of room. Their affliction was lived down finally, like many an older person's, but they refrained from going back to the culinary regions for almost two hours.

Long before lamp-light Stella and Virgil began begging to be allowed to hang up their stockings and go to bed, thinking, doubtless, to decoy old Santa Claus and the great day into coming all the earlier. Nellie, trying to keep their restless hands and minds employed, sent them to the borders of the flower beds to pick violets for decorating the table next day; and she, eager to have the benefit of every ray of departing light, took

her needle work and sat upon the front steps to finish it.

The earth and the sky were thoroughly water-soaked, and although neither were actually wet at the time, they threatened to unite with a veil of Christmas rain at any hour. The elements were like a nervous, melancholy woman, quiet and gloomy; and keeping every one in anxious dread lest some untoward event might press too heavily upon the strained curb and precipitate the dreaded outburst. The weather had for days been warm and sullen, and there had been no fires in the house except in the kitchen or perhaps in Mrs. Barrett's room early in the mornings, to dry off the chill of the atmosphere. Out on the lawn, here and there, a pert, adventurous tuft of orchard grass or clover stood up like a giant emerald in its setting of faded brown. Flower seeds, too, that had dropped upon the beds in summer and lain sleeping throughout the autumn frosts, were starting up cheerily, only to perish with the first icy touch of the coming infant year.

All of the cooking was finished that could be done before hand, except a few pies which Lillie was then tending, and Nellie came to the front steps to put the final stitches in a handkerchief case intended for Durieux on the morrow. Her other gifts had all been completed and laid aside days before,—the exquisite doilies for her mother, the new smoking jacket for her father, and the slipper case for Wheeler; besides others for her girl and servant friends. This one would have been done too, but it required a little more ribbon and another yard of chiffon to complete the beauty of its handsomely painted satin; these had to be ordered, and with characteristic perversity of such things, delayed their coming until the afternoon's mail.

There was another gift unfinished and laid away with a tear-drop soaked into its embroidered velvet sur-

face. This one was meant for a photograph envelope, and Dr. Allison was the one for whom it was designed, but it was folded away and many a bright, sweet hope was put away, too, as the box lid shut it into darkness.

Nellie was at work upon it and had it half done, when, her father coming into the room where she sat, she held it up for his admiration, asking gaily:

"How do you like it, father?"

"Very much," he replied, always taking an interest in her handiwork. "Very much, indeed. I believe it is quite the handsomest piece you've ever made. Who is it for?"

Nellie was delighted with his praise. It was her wish to make this the most beautiful of them all, and she was elated with her success.

"This is for Dr. Allison," she said vivaciously. She took up her needle again and was threading it when she heard her father say in that courteous, not to be disobeyed voice she knew so well:

"Virgil, you and the baby go out of doors to play."

He was silent until the two children gathered up their playthings and went out of the room, leaving the door open behind them as children usually do. Mr. Barrett laid down the paper he had pretended to read that the children might not suspect him of having an unusual reason for sending them from the room, and went and closed the door. Returning, he stood with his back to the fire and looked steadily at the girl's bowed head.

"Nellie," he began, "for some time I have been apprehensive that a friendship exists between yourself and Dr. Allison which distresses me to consider. I feel a great delicacy, my dear, in inquiring into your actions or affections, but this is a matter I cannot leave to the adjustment of chance. I must therefore put aside my reluctance to speaking to you on the subject and ask

you the direct question: Do you feel any particular interest in Dr. Allison,—in other words, is his friendship more to you than that of the other young men of your acquaintance?"

Nellie folded her cold hands tightly in her lap to control their trembling. Had she suddenly been confronted by the entire bench of supreme judges she could not have been more daunted, more intimidated. That her father, the one she revered and loved almost more than any one else on earth, should question her, seemed more than she could bear. He whom she had always looked to as the arbiter of her being—who had criticized her so sparingly, and loved her so unboundedly,—that he should speak to her with that cold tone in his voice made her faint with dread. She had never disobeyed her father willfully in her life—his commendation was too precious to risk the losing. What was she to say now? What was she to do? Her brain seemed to be going around in a whirl that blotted out all ability to act.

Mr. Barrett stood waiting for her to speak, and Nellie knew how he looked without raising her eyes. He was standing with his proudly poised head bent slightly forward in order to catch her meaning; his shoulders well back, and his hands clasped behind him; his earnest eyes, with that unwavering firmness in their glance, reflecting the self-control and will that harbored behind them, were bent upon her.

"Nellie,—"

"Yes, father, I heard—"

"Then, my dear, you need not speak. My most poignant fears are realized." There was a painful silence, and then he resumed. "My child, that precaution which I believe to be your only salvation from a future life of sorrow must be enforced. You must promise me today that henceforth you will have no further communication with this man."

"Father, stop! How can I promise that?"

"Nellie!" There was a pathos in the exclamation that made the unhappy girl feel like a culprit. "Has it gone as far as this!"

"Oh, father, how can I make you understand," she cried in her wretched perplexity. "He loves me so much, so truly, and I—" she broke off and covered her flushed face with her hands.

"My dear child, what can you know of love? How can you judge of what is in a man's inmost thoughts by what he whispers into a pretty, willing ear? Perhaps you showed him your preference, and he, eager for new sensations, worded what he suspected lay in your own heart."

"Oh, father!" Nellie lifted her head and looked at the author of this stinging suggestion with a dignity that was true child to a father's pride.

"I beg your pardon, my child; I did not mean to wound you. Still, I must reiterate: In this matter you can not possibly be a judge. Think, my daughter; think of your youth—what is a girl of eighteen but a child?"

For an instant Nellie lifted her head and flashed a sparkling glance at Mr. Barrett.

"Mother—"

"Yes, yes, I know. Your mother was only seventeen, you would say. But our betrothal took place under very different auspices. I was nearly thirty, and prepared to provide for a wife, and her parents were anxious for the match, whereas this Allison—"

"We realize that we must wait. He has spoken of his poverty and his ambitions. I am willing to wait—"

"Waiting will avail nothing," Mr. Barrett said, trenchantly. "I may as well tell you now as to disguise the truth. I can never—I shall never, as long as I live, consent to your marrying Edward Allison!"

Mr. Barrett's voice was rising in anger. "His ambitions," he exclaimed, filling with wrath at the thought. "His ambitions, indeed! What could gratify his ambition more than to know himself married to you—to my daughter, and establishing himself upon my influence and position?"

"Don't be hasty, father," she pleaded. "You scarcely know him."

"Not know him—Nellie, can you compare your facilities for knowing him with mine? You who see him only in a parlor, when he has assumed his manner together with his dress clothes? Do I not know that his constant associates are Vincent Minor and Sidney Carroll?"

"That is due to his unavoidable circumstances. He has told me how deeply he regrets it." Nellie had scarcely spoken the words before she realized her mistake. Her father's self-control slipped from his grasp.

"Nellie," he said sternly, "I will discuss this matter with you no further. You must promise me, now, that henceforth you will have no communication with Dr. Allison whatever. Will you promise?"

The girl arose slowly to her feet, the forgotten embroidery falling unheeded upon the carpet. As she drew herself up to her full height, she said firmly, sadly:

"No, father, I can not promise now a contradiction of a promise already given."

"To what effect, may I ask?"

"To be true to him and wait for him until he is in a position to ask you for me."

Mr. Barrett was staggered by the girl's clear answer and the decisive meaning in her glowing eyes. He walked to the window and gazed out upon the sun-lit leafless trees. This, then, was the result of eighteen years of example and precept in the code of honor. He realized all he had lost by thus dallying with chance

and waiting for circumstances to shape themselves. He went back to the fire-place, where the girl still stood with bowed head, and endeavored to make a last effort to gain his wish.

"You must promise me, at least, that you will never marry him without my consent!"

The girl looked up imploringly.

"Father, you would make me promise that?"

"And why not?" he demanded.

"Father, how can I? Have you not just said that you would never give your consent—never? Would you take advantage of me?"

"No, child, no. I would take undue advantage of no one." He paused, and stood staring at the rug.

"Will you promise me, then, that you will not take advantage of me—that you will not marry him without my knowledge?"

"Yes, sir, I will promise you that."

"Thank you. You will now please write to Dr. Allison and tell him of this interview. I shall write, too, to tell him of my decision. I shall ask him, if he values my respect for him as a gentleman, not to seek an interview with you upon any occasion without my permission."

Nellie, too full of dumb misery to make reply, went to her room, and Mr. Barrett sat at his wife's desk and wrote his letter.

An hour later, when Nellie returned, she handed what she had written to her father, with the unsealed flap of the envelope uppermost. Mr. Barrett took it, turned it over and read the address, written in the strong, dashing angles of the girl-of-the-day's penmanship; then sealed it firmly and put into his pocket.

Nellie was still near him, standing with bowed head, her tightly clasped hands dropped before her. He reached out his arms and enfolded her, drawing her to

his heart with tenderest fondness. Nellie threw her arms about his neck, and clinging to him as though to shield herself from her suffering, burst into a storm of tears that shook her slender young form with hard, passionate sobs.

It was not soon that Mr. Barrett succeed in quieting her. He sat down again, and took his petted darling upon his knees as he had done years before, when her beautiful doll slipped from her arms and crashed upon the cruel pavement. More than once Mr. Barrett's handkerchief was pressed to his own aching eyes, and then to hers; but he was not a man to shrink from pain when the saving of a vital part was the alternative.

This had happened weeks before Christmas, and the first sharp edges of her pain had been dulled by the busy days that intervened. The embroidered velvet had been put away where the sight of it would not be a reminder of that merciless hour with her father; and unselfishness made her hide her aching heart from those who loved her best.

Mrs. Barrett was visiting a sick neighbor when the interview took place between her husband and Nellie, and when upon her return Mr. Barrett told her of all that had transpired, she sighed, and with closed lips trusted to the judgment of him whose past proved that in all serious matters it was best to rely upon his guidance. The mother suffered in the grief of her child, but she dared not interfere where interference might cause unutterable harm. She liked Dr. Allison sincerely, and feared sadly that Mr. Barrett was unreasonable in his unfaith in the young man's character; but she felt that she was powerless to prove his virtues or his vices. Then, too, Mrs. Barrett was one of those particularly placid women, in whom rebellion toward circumstances or fate was an alien part.

As days went by, Nellie's cheeks grew paler and her merry wit ceased to sparkle in fireside chat. She was grave and thoughtful, and nothing seemed to move her to her old vivacity. Mrs. Barrett was alarmed, and suggested that she should visit her aunt in New Orleans, where perhaps intercourse with her cousins and their large circle of acquaintances might restore her to her former peaceful life. When the visit was proposed to Nellie, she quietly acquiesced. It mattered little to her now where she was or who were her companions. The sun of her day seemed set, and twilight was all that was left.

As Nellie sat on the front steps in the warm, moist air, skillfully twisting her ribbon into graceful loops and knots, her thoughts were not of the man for whom it all was intended, but of him who occupied the purest, sweetest shrine a man had ever been apotheosised to fill—the first altar of her girlish heart.

Her chain of dreary thought was by and by broken by a noise in the rear of the house. She became conscious that Stella and Virgil were cooing and coaxing to something they were inviting into the house, and she wondered what new discovery they had made. She devoutly hoped it was not a new deer, or another coon.

Nellie's many admirers had a distressing way of sending pets to the children, in the mistaken hope of ingratiating themselves into the better esteem of the older members of the family; and if all of the animals that had been sent at various times could have been gathered together, a zoological garden on a pretty fair scale would have been the result. There had been deer, rabbits, dogs, cats, raccoons, an infant alligator, a turtle, a crane, mocking birds, canaries, pigeons, a pelican, a young otter, a peacock, besides several squirrels; and Nellie lived in daily dread that the monkey

and parrot would come next, for Stella had revealed the fact that she wanted the latter, and Virgil had openly declared that he'd "just give anything for a monkey."

Whenever a new animal was received the children went into ecstasies over it, and everybody who came to the house was consulted as to the best way to rear it, and the most appropriate name to give it.

The law of the survival of the fittest fortunately holds good with pets, as with everything else, and the stock had dwindled down to a setter dog, a maltese cat, the peafowls, and a white pigeon. So it was with relief that Nellie found, when she went to the door, that the commotion upon the occasion was caused by the arrival of the children's greatest pet of all—Lillie's little boy, Robert.

Robert lived with his grandmother, as the children of young negro women who love balls and picnics generally do, but he had come across the fields to visit his mother, and Stella and Virgil were bringing him into the house to initiate him in the delights of hanging up his stocking. This being only the second Christmas that had come since that young man's advent, he was totally in the dark as to the required proceedings. The little darkey was toiling up the back steps on all fours, clutching his stocking in one fat fist and trying to hold his skirts out of the way with the other. Lillie was following close behind, laughing and talking to the children and carrying her own stocking, bought for the occasion, in her hand. When Robert reached the last step, Stella stooped to help him, retained his chubby hand, while Virgil took the other; and then with explanations of the great mystery that was soon to be enacted, they walked along, keeping the colored child between them. This was not Robert's first excursion into "the white folk's house," for Stella and

Virgil smuggled him in whenever they found a chance, and there they played with him and fed him on cake and candy to the detriment of anything frailer than goat's or an ordinary child's digestive apparatus.

The quartette, followed by Nellie, went into Mrs. Barrett's room and that lady assisted in hanging the two new stockings over the empty fire-place, side by side with the children's, which had been hanging there some time.

When this was carefully done and the children consented to let Robert go, Lillie took her son by the hand to lead him off. He was willing to accompany her, but he did not like the idea of leaving any of his wearing apparel behind. He went to the fire-place and reached up after his stocking, and when Lillie told him again that he must leave it, he walked out reluctantly, casting glances over his shoulder and mumbling about "tocin in Mi Ba's oom."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Although Dr. Allison told Nellie to the contrary, he did at times, bravely as he fought against it, find Lauren's Station a dreary hole of probation. A hole it was in truth, situated in the midst of the great swamps, where the railway tracks that crossed them were built for miles and miles upon an embankment as tall as that which held the Mississippi's grizzly waters in check. There was a beautiful bayou, spanned by the railway bridge, running through Lauren's plantation, and it was in the angle formed by this bayou and the railroad that the depot, plantation store, and gin house stood. These buildings were all set upon pillars that raised their floors to a level with the top of the embankment, and they reminded one of a bevy of school-boys out for play on stilts. A stranger might well wonder why houses were built here at all, if they must be constructed with reference to an overflow as the essential feature; and no better answer could be given him than to point out the fields at hand, where two men, well mounted, might ride along between separate cotton rows, so tall that they would be concealed from each other's view from one end of the field to the other and yet carry on a conversation all the while. Or where a man might walk between the rows of corn and see nothing but the green swaying forest about him and a bit of blue sky over head.

The man who owns and cultivates such land can quickly become a millionaire; and yet there are few millionaires in north Louisiana, for that great, silent, anti-wealth Hercules breaks his fetters once in a while

and sweeps the planter off his feet, leaving him to learn to stand where once he ran.

There is an allurements, too, that none can resist. No white man can content himself with his circumstances unless he has a right to claim some of this wonderful dark soil as his own—the fascination to have and to hold it against all threatening conditions is a power the native-born can not thwart; so upon this smiling goddess he stakes his all. From the first dollar put upon the throw, he becomes more and more involved until the game closes, and he finds himself vastly rich or hopelessly “broke.” Planting is the most hazardous game of chance, and the planter the most enslaved gambler of them all. He can not be convinced that luck will always be his foe, and he woos the fickle coquette year after year, until his grey hairs are laid upon his last pillow and the last acre of his beloved soil gives him the rest his weary spirit craves.

These fertile bottom lands, of which Lauren’s plantation is a small part, lying from ten to seventy miles westward of the river, is like an interminable trough catching the waters from any break in the levee between the Arkansas boundaries to the white sands of the gulf; and truly was it once said that this southern swamp was worthy of a granite wall from Minnesota to the southern sea.

Lauren’s Station, from a social point of view, was absolutely nothing. The only white people who lived there were the three young men, Allison, Carroll, and Minor; and the nearest neighbor was three miles distant. The passenger trains and the two freights that passed the station, going east and west, daily, always wafted a breath of the outer world through the primeval solitude of the place and made it seem a little less the wilderness that it was.

In saying that Lauren’s was a place of probation,

Dr. Allison accepted one of the unwritten laws of prejudice. He knew that however well a man might know his profession, the world demands a certain length of practice before it will hold out a lifting hand to help him up the thorny steeps to success. Besides this, he was young; and, what annoyed him sorely, the world would not credit him with the twenty-seven years his life entitled him to. He came of a fair, lightly bearded race, and despite his coaxing he had only a handsome blonde mustache to conceal the youthful smoothness of his face. He was deeply interested in his profession, loving it as his father had before him, and he had faith in the old saying, "All things come to him who waits." Whenever Allison quoted this favorite saw of his, he always mentally supplemented "properly." So he accepted the obscure practice, with its fairly good income, believing that time and vigilance would bring in its train age and experience, and with these assistants he knew that fortune and fame would be subject to his bidding. A better hearted man never lived than he. He was generous and unselfish to a degree that made him conspicuous, and he shrank from wounding another's feelings as he would from wounding his person—far more, for when fulfilling his duties as surgeon he looked upon his patient as so much valuable material to be restored to its normal condition regardless of costs.

And yet this man, with all his excellent qualities, possessed a temper that was hot and passionate. Friction with his schoolmates throughout his boyhood had taught him to hold this fiery steed that can so easily bear one on to destruction, and he had learned to hold it with a steel-like grip that seldom failed in its duty.

There must have been other traits too, to be watched and guarded, hereditary, both, or why did a sweet girl friend, who had known him all her life, put her best

work into a picture she painted and sent to him? In one corner it was named "The Three Vices," and the pretty frame revealed a canvas upon which was shown the corner of a table where stood a half filled wine-glass, a pack of cards with dice lying near, and a cigar with its grey end over the marble edge of the table sending a slender curl of smoke upward, that floated across the cards and goblet and made them seem in a misty distance.

Allison laughed when he unpacked the gift and hung it opposite his bed in the single small room he called his own, and then he wrote a long cheery letter to his little friend telling her that her implied fears would never be realized. Thanking her for her present and its gentle warning, which he assured her was unnecessary though received in the spirit it was meant, he went on to say that no one more fully appreciated than he the affliction that two of these vices had wreaked upon poor frail humanity.

The men who shared Dr. Allison's isolation were Vincent Minor, the railroad agent, and Sidney Carroll, manager of the plantation. Both of these men clerked in the store too, for there was not enough employment in the depot, telegraph office, and post office to keep one man busy.

Carroll was a native born swamper. His ancestors had been the *élite* of the parish for close upon a hundred years, and his relatives still were esteemed among the most cultured and refined of her citizens; but somehow the mantle of aristocracy was a misfit on Carroll's shoulders and had a way of slipping off at times, and oftentimes at that, disclosing as wild and reckless a scapegrace as ever blotted a fair record. When he chose, Carroll could behave himself with the bearing of a young prince, and could converse with a brilliant wit that upheld his fine old name. Nature

in giving him his riotous predilections had shrewdly enveloped them in a pleasing covering, and Carroll's handsome face with its fair coloring and strong masculine beauty, together with his finely rounded figure, was something to be looked upon the second time, and remembered, too.

Like all of the oldest and one time wealthiest families of the state, the greater part of the Carroll property had passed into the hands of aliens, and the daughters and sons were no longer commanding retinues of well trained servants, but were occupied in earning their daily bread. The handsome family silver and jewels in some instances remained, but in most cases this too was lost. It came by aid of the lands, and when the lands were in danger of departing, it returned the way it had come, to save the soil from gliding away in exchange for necessities.

Minor was Carroll's equal in all respects, and differed from him only in outward appearance and habits of industry. Carroll was the oldest of the three. He was muscular and active, with a carriage and dignity that pedigree alone can make unconscious.

He was somewhat boastful of his physical strength and endurance; and of the latter advantage no one could doubt who ever watched the quantity of liquids he could absorb and stand up under. Yet the fact that he held such a place as manager of Lauren's proclaimed him expert in business, too. He was never a bully, but he was an incessant tease; and this peculiarity enabled him to carry his point where the force of his powerful fist would have failed. When Carroll took it into his head to make a friend do a certain thing or go to a certain place, it resulted in his doing what he wished him to, or fighting; and Carroll's child-like good humor and love of fun was such that it was hard to make him fight until he had first been con-

quered by the cup which possesses all the evils that the teacup does not, and then those who knew him best took care to let him alone. He would bet upon anything, from what a preacher's text would be to the speed of his own carefully-trained horse, and on again to nigger shooting craps; and generally, whether he lost or won, it was much the same to him, provided he had the pleasure of putting his own valuation upon his opinions.

Sidney Carroll and Vincent Minor could scarcely remember the time when they were not chums, and it may have been due to their unlimited opportunities of educating each other in their respective peculiarities, that they finally became so thoroughly congenial in all particulars.

CHAPTER XIX.

Christmas day passed at Lauren's much as it usually did, with the habitual percentage of occupation for the doctor, arising from differences of opinion in the ball-room or over a crap game, and punctuated by knife blade or pistol shot; but, all things considered, the day passed off very quietly, and now the colored social world was in a high state of anticipation over the approaching wedding of the daughter of Lauren's society leader, Aunt Parthenia White.

The rain, which had for so long been threatening, came down at dusk on Christmas day in torrents of icy drops, and had fallen pitilessly all the day after, with hardly an hour's cessation, to clear off sulkily at noon on the 27th, the day appointed for the nuptials.

The evening for the great event came, and the bride stood before her mirror a vision of radiant ebony and snowy raiment. She was attired in a beautiful white satin dress, that had been conspicuous at one or two parish balls, where it enhanced the charms of one of Asola's prettiest girls; but she, not wanting to appear too often in the same costume, had transferred the handsome affair to Aunt Parthenia upon terms satisfactory to them both.

Nothing necessary to the completion of her attire had been omitted, from the cluster of white blossoms that held the snowy illusion in place, to the white kid gloves upon her hands; and the girl stood beholding her reflection in the looking-glass, as happy a mortal as this earth ever held.

She had the delight of knowing that no other colored bride in the parish had ever been more beautifully or

more extravagantly arrayed; nor was any capable of creating the sensation that she was now the center of. Her dress waist fitted her finely-turned figure to perfection; there was not a wrinkle visible anywhere, and she stood its vice-like clasp with true feminine heroism. She never thought of flinching when her mother drew up the all-important strings in the back, and the bridesmaid closed the waist in front with the aid of a shoe-buttoner; and after the fastening was once accomplished she gave no thought of the pressure about her plump form, except to reflect upon its becomingness. Her finery was as resplendent upon this dusky descendant of a probable African prince, as a Worth costume would be upon the daughter of a multimillionaire; for after all it is comparison that is the source of opinion, and gives it all its weight.

Miss White was not what her name would picture to the imagination, by any means; and there, again, did contrast strike like a sledgehammer. Her round, joyous face, with its big black eyes, and heavy grayish lips curving outward in a broad grin, showed beneath her filmy veil, to the admiration of her host of women friends—as pretty as a face needs to be in its shadowy perfection. She knew that she was regarded the luckiest girl the sun ever shone upon, for she was stepping from a realm of great belledom into the empire of envied wifehood. Howard Gully was *the* catch of the plantation. He was handsome and debonair, and, what the negro most admires, delightfully light-complexioned—the life of any social gathering, the confidential servant at the store, as steady as a judge, and drawing a salary that would make his wife the most important “lady” on the plantation.

No wonder Melissa White was happy! Not only had she captured Howard Gully as her own especial prize, but she had received three handsome presents

from the gentlemen at Lauren's that any bride might have valued.

Dr. Allison had presented her with a willow rocking-chair of the best quality, Mr. Munroe had given her an elegant lamp, and Mr. Carroll had given her a fine bureau, the like of which few inhabitants of Lauren's had ever beheld, with its tall beveled mirror and velvet-lined drawers.

Melissa had decided to have but one "waiter," and this honored person was Ella Green. Ella and she had been good friends as children, and when they went off to boarding school together, their friendship had been securely cemented by the bond of dependence entailed by their loneliness amid so many strangers in a large town.

Ella stood beside her, now, helping her on with her gloves, arrayed in a stylish dress of pink silk, that made her really pretty face, with its delicate features and dreamy, fawn-like eyes, seem all the more refined, and caused the too robust bride to seem at a disadvantage by comparison.

When Aunt Parthenia went to Mr. Carroll to get him to send off for those things for the bride that could not be procured in Sigma or Asola, the question of gloves had arisen; and when Aunt Parthenia was told what a pair of white kids would cost, she looked serious, and came to the point with her characteristic promptness and her strident voice, that discounted Trilby's in volume:

"Lissy jes got to do 'thout 'em den. I 'low I done laid out money enough on dat gal already to 'vide her wid meat and bread a whole year."

Melissa was standing near and Dr. Allison saw the look of disappointment that clouded her countenance.

"Why, no need of buying gloves, Aunt Parthenia," he said decisively, "I believe I have the very things Lissy needs."

He went to his room in the back of the store and returned presently with the gloves he had worn the night of the ever to be remembered tournament ball. Melissa was delighted, and Aunt Parthenia went on, thoughtfully :

“Den, Lissy got to have slippers.”

“No need of buying slippers either,” said Minor. “I’ve got the very things.” So he in turn went to his room in the depot, and came back bringing the patent leather dancing pumps he had worn on the same memorable occasion. These were a little large, but upon the whole proved satisfactory ; for Minor had a small foot and the bride a rather large one even for her race.

When the bride and brides-maid were ready, Aunt Parthenia put the finishing touches to her own toilette. She wore a becoming suit of black silk, for she considered nothing so appropriate for elderly persons, nor so altogether ladylike for all occasions. Her dress was not quite the latest style in cut, for she had had it four or five years, but it was of exquisite quality and was trimmed with expensive jet that flashed in the lamp light almost equal to diamonds. Her costume was brightened by a collar of white lace and a couple of yards of wide pink satin ribbon at her chin, tied in long ends and short loops.

In describing the wedding next day to her grandmother, Ella Green dwelt particularly upon the elegance of Aunt Parthenia’s personal appearance.

Parthenia was an immense woman, standing five feet, eight inches barefooted, and had not an angle nor a bone visible about her well cushioned frame, yet she was not at all corpulent ; she was simply massive—like her ideas of wedding suppers. She had lived in every neighborhood in the parish and had warm friends among both races in them all. She had served in many of the best white families, and it was her boast that

she "had never worked for no po'-white-trash in her life." She had cooked several wedding feasts in her time and had assisted at balls and parties without number, and she felt that she, if anybody, ought to know how such things should be conducted.

She had been cooking for the young men at Laurens for two years, and having nursed Sidney Carroll when he was a baby and cooked for Mrs. Minor when Vincent was in knee pants, she felt that she had a claim upon these two individuals that no one could dispute. Sidney was still "my baby" to her and Vincent was "son" as often as Mr. Minor.

Aunt Parthenia was certainly "quality" to the very finger tips, and though her language had much of the big-mouthed vernacular of the cornfield nigger about it, she had made it her duty to see that her only child should be properly educated. The definition of that term was, to Aunt Parthenia, an ability to read and figure enough to secure a position as school teacher, and to be able to play on the organ in Sunday school. When Melissa first came home from boarding school, she tried to correct some of her mother's careless methods of expressing her meaning, but Aunt Parthenia would have none of it.

"Go 'long, gal," she retorted, indignantly. "What's comin' over you? Don't you reckon I knows how to talk? Ain't I ben 'sociatin' wid de bes' white folks they is ever sence I was knee-high to a grasshopper? Hump!"

Aunt Parthenia exaggerated, though, in this last statement. She had lived with her parents in the cotton-field until she was sixteen years old, and the influences of her earlier training had never been outgrown. She cheerfully stood over the cook-stove and wash-tub, winter and summer, that Melissa might have an education befitting her station in life, and there her duty to erudition ended.

The wedding guests were arriving rapidly, and Aunt Parthenia was bustling about here, there, and everywhere; welcoming the people, attending to the fires, and trying to see that everything was as it should be, all at once. One of her greatest anxieties was to "keep dem niggers outen de supper-room twel de time come."

"Lawd," she muttered, "why don't Elder Claiborne come on, den us kin eat, and git supper off my mind."

"Aunt Parthenia," mildly suggested the bridegroom at her elbow, "why don't you lock up the house—"

"Lawd, honey, you see dat now, I never onct thought of dat! 'Two heads is better'n one.' Go 'long, Mr. Gully, an' lock hit. I had done clean forgot de do' had a key. Run over to de sto', too, and tell de doctor an' dem to come on. I wouldn't have de gent'men to miss seein' de weddin for nothin' on earth, kine as dey's ben all along."

When the bridegroom returned, having attended to all of his future mother-in-law's commissions, sneaking along behind the three white guests and suffering from an attack of dry-grins, Elder Claiborne was just getting out of his buggy. The minister of the gospel readjusted his snowy cuffs and cravat, and carefully smoothed out the skirts of his Prince Albert coat with his neatly gloved hands, leaving his admiring attendant, and one or two others who had come forward to be of service, to see to putting up his horse.

He took his tall silk hat in his hand and walked up the steps, speaking patronizingly to his acquaintances standing around him, in his rich, bland voice. The buzz of conversation hushed to a whisper as the august personage stepped upon the gallery, and the fiddle, that had given spasmodic squeaks every now and then, was laid upon the mantelpiece by way of removing temptation; for Aunt Parthenia had gone to the fiddler and said:

"Romeo, ef you dares to start a chune on dat fiddle 'fo' de bride 'pears in de do'way, I lay I will pintedly bust yo' head wide open!"

Aunt Parthenia was laboring under a great nervous strain, as Romeo could see by the light in her eye, and he knew better than to run any risks.

When Elder Claiborne met his hostess at the door and inquired after the state of her health in his most stately and patronizing manner, she led him aside and said:

"Elder, Gully's got a beautiful ring for de ceremony, but when de time comes jes let him han' hit to her, 'cause hits too much trouble fur her to git her glove off; and he kin put hit on her finger most any time, jes' as well."

"Certainly, Madam," bowed the elder; "certainly, certainly,—but—a—does Mr. Gully understan' your requeses in the matter?"

"Yes, sir, I done been 'splained hit all to him."

At last everything being in readiness, the door, upon which all eyes had been centered for moments of eager expectation, was thrown open with a flourish, and the bridesmaid and best man, followed by Lissy and Howard, marched slowly into the room to the animating strains of "The Dago from Italy," and everybody pressed forward with keenest interest.

When the bride and groom had proceeded to the center of the room and were met by the elder, a great snowy hand was upraised impressively, and a solemn hush pervaded the room like a benediction.

As the last words of the ceremony were concluded and the preacher congratulated Mr. and Mrs. Gully, a shout of relief went up from the over-taxed nerves of the audience that made the shingles overhead vibrate. The fiddle squeaked and squawked frantically, and old Romeo screamed:

"Git your podners fur de fust coddill!"

Hands and feet began to pat, and bodies swayed in delighted time to Romeo's music, and everybody became wild with mirth.

The three white men were the first, after the preacher, to congratulate the happy couple and wish them joy, and their example was followed so energetically by the colored friends, who were to do everything that was necessary to make the occasion a success, that Gully felt he could endure no more, and dashed out on the gallery to get a breath of fresh air and regain his equilibrium. This, however, was an unfortunate move on his part, for the first man he encountered was Carroll, standing outside with Minor and Allison, and watching the scene through the open doorway. Gully saw his mistake and tried to dodge, but too late, for Carroll saw him and began:

"Hello, Howard, what's your hurry—anybody sick?"

Howard was again attacked with dry-grins, and could not say a word. Carroll caught him by his coat-sleeve and turned him toward the door.

"Here, here; this will never do. What will your blushing bride think of your leaving her to struggle through this ordeal unaided by your protecting presence?"

Lissy did not seem to need sympathy. She stood in the middle of the room, surrounded by a chattering crowd, tossing her head and putting on airs with the ease of a veteran society leader. Minor was so forcibly struck with the absurdity of Carroll's championship of the bride that he almost bent double in a shout of laughter, and the cold perspiration burst upon the bridegroom's troubled brow.

"Lawd-a-mussy, Boss, for Gawd's sake don't say no more! If I just had something to kinder brace me up like—"

Carroll snatched a small flask from his pocket and

held it toward him tragically. Howard laughed in spite of himself, and took the bottle, swallowing a big gulp, envied by the group of colored spectators. He handed it back to Carroll, but he waved it off, and one after another black hand reached out for it until it was empty. The last man who got possession of it had barely time enough to swallow the last drop and throw the flask out into the bayou, when Aunt Parthenia appeared in the doorway.

"Mr. Gully! Howard! Wha' is dat fool nigger done hid hisself!"

She would have seen him at first if her eyes had not been blinded by the change of light. Gully stepped forward sheepishly and received his orders:

"Go git de bride and lead de way to de supper room. Bro'er Claiborne, please, sir, fur to 'nounce dat de ladies and gent'men will now walk out to supper."

Parthenia's house stood some distance back of the store, facing the bayou, and the supper was spread in a vacant cabin a little further on. Between these two houses cotton-bagging had been stretched, to keep the bride's silken skirts from being draggled in the mud. This precaution was hardly necessary, however, by the time the pathway was needed, for the rain had ceased falling, and the ground was beginning to freeze hard and clean.

Elder Claiborne gallantly offered his arm to Sister White as soon as he finished announcing that supper was ready, but Parthenia declined imperiously.

"Neve' min', Bro'er Claiborne; I ain't got no time for foolishness. You carry Sister Crayton out to supper; she's de most 'portantest comp'ny here," and with these words she preceded the crowd, her long, swinging stride putting her at the cabin door before the others were fairly on their way. The fires were hastily rebuilt in the two rooms that were in use as

supper halls, and the lights were turned up brightly by the time Melissa and Howard took their places at one of the long tables.

These tables were roughly built of plank upon trestles, and were high enough for the guests to eat from them comfortably while standing. They were covered with osnaburg, such as is used for cotton-pickers' racks, borrowed from the store, together with the plates, dishes, cups and saucers, knives and forks necessary for the banquet, and this cotton fabric answered admirably as tablecloth. Upon this was crowded such an abundance of delicious turkeys, salads, roast pigs, cakes, and custards as to make the wedding guests stare in amazement. They had come expecting to see something beyond the usual order of such things, but they were hardly prepared for such a spread as greeted their vision when they entered the brightly-lighted rooms.

A small table, with chairs for three, and set with silver and linen, stood in one corner of the room where the bridal party was to sup, placed for the white guests, who came in with the rest and sat down. All who could get to the tables took their places, and the others, mostly half-grown boys and girls, grouped around the fire to patiently await their turn.

When the noise of moving feet had subsided, Parthenia looked to Brother Claiborne to ask the blessing.

Mr. Claiborne had never had an opportunity to display his eloquence before to these young men, nor any other white people, in fact, and he quickly saw his chance, and grasped it. He began with the conventional words of the blessing, and lengthened them into a prayer; then, waxing rhetorical, he spread into a discourse of such length that Aunt Parthenia grew restless.

She threw her downcast eyes first at the minister and

then at the bubbling coffee-pot before the fire, and wondered when he would be through. Brother Claiborne kept talking and the coffee kept bubbling, and finally, fearful that the latter would all boil away before it could be used, prudence got the better of piety and Parthenia coldly watched her chance. Brother Claiborne's words flowed swiftly and smoothly between his tobacco stained teeth with no promise of cessation, but at last he had to draw his breath and in that instant's time Parthenia gained the day.

"Amen!" she shouted briskly, and instantly began bustling about, rattling cups and clinking spoons with unnecessary energy.

If the big golden turkey before him had suddenly exploded, Elder Claiborne could not have been more taken aback. He looked at Sister White for a moment in helpless consternation, then noticing that the gentlemen over in the corner were still bowed in prayer, he uttered a sonorous "Amen!" and picked up his knife and fork.

Three pairs of shoulders were shaking convulsively. Carroll lifted his head with tears streaming down his scarlet cheeks, and catching the dancing eyes of his companions, he stamped his foot in a paroxysm of mirth and yelled at the top of his voice:

"Three cheers for the bride!"

A shout of laughter went up in the corner so contagious that a hundred black throats took it up, and when it had rolled away, the feasting began in earnest.

When the supper was half over and the merriment at its height, a late guest arrived. Parthenia was too busy serving ambrosia to go forward and shake hands with him, so she looked across her shoulder and called out cordially:

"Come in, Allen; glad to see you, son. Come up to the fire an' warm yourseff."

Allen, for it was Allen Whitney, came in and walked toward the fireplace, but first he went to Dr. Allison and handed him a dainty square envelope, such as young ladies fancy for their correspondence.

Allison took the note without a word, and without looking at his companions quietly put it into his pocket and went on with his supper.

"Ahem!" Carroll coughed and Allison unwittingly looked up, meeting his merry, twinkling eye. Carroll nudged Minor with his elbow, and both looked at Allison and laughed softly. Allison smiled too, and blushed, and knowing that he blushed, flushed with annoyance at his self betrayal.

"Oh, read your letter, Ed," said Carroll, affecting indifference.

Allison laughed. "That's all right; it will keep."

"Eh?" said Carroll, with a lunge at Allison's pocket, "then I'll read it for you!"

"I swear you won't!" Allison said positively, though he laughed again and dodged Carroll's hand.

Carroll laughed and made several remarks calculated to irritate Allison, but he took it all good naturedly until the former, thinking he was not succeeding in his teasing, said sarcastically:

"You are a lucky dog, Ed. I wish I had your chances at old Barrett's tin through sweet little Nellie."

Like a flash Allison bounded to his feet, white with fury. "Sidney," he said hotly, "if you say another word, I'll blow your brains out."

Carroll retorted sullenly, and Allison left the room.

He did not notice that Allen was following him until he reached Parthenia's house, and recollecting that the rooms were warm and empty, he opened the door to go in; Allen started up the stairs too, and still angry, Dr. Allison saw him and demanded: "What do you want?"

"I thought I'd saddle your horse for you, sir," the boy replied cautiously.

"Ah, anybody sick,—who wants me?"

"Is—a—is you read your letter?" the darkey answered timidly.

"No, come in. I'll see about it." Allison had forgotten the note entirely. He went into the house, and going to a lamp, opened the envelope and read the contents of the communication. Then he went to the fireplace where Allen stood warming himself, and stuck the note and envelope under the wood in the hottest coals, and watched it burn to a crisp. The boy noticed the troubled lines that contracted his brow at he stood staring at the burnt note.

Allison started from his reverie. "That's all right," he said, "saddle my horse; I will go and get my overcoat and leggings."

CHAPTER XX.

It was a long, cold ride, black as despair; and the sleet peppered Allison's face until he almost groaned with the pain. Not realizing how low the mercury had sunk since nightfall, he started out unprepared to battle with any of the elements but mud or rain, and he was glad indeed when a faint light delineating the cracks about the doorway and window of the cabin he was seeking showed that it stood before him. His first thought when he dismounted was for the comfort of his horse, and Allen, who knew the place well, took the animal to a dilapidated cotton house near, where he would be protected from the savage wind.

When Allen returned to where the young man stood awaiting him, he whispered softly:

"She told me to tell you to knock three times or whistle and call her name, so she would know it was you."

"What are you going to do?"

"She told me to go on home and put up the horse. She said the ground would be froze and she would rather walk back, and she said you would go back with her."

The hurried exchange of words was uttered in low tones, and Dr. Allison's voice sank even lower as he went on speaking:

"All right, then, you can go. But, Allen—"

"Yes, sir."

"Listen to me, boy. It hasn't been long since I pulled you out of the jaws of death, do you know it?"

"Yes, *sir*! God A'mighty knows I ain't forgot it. I

certainly would a'died, doctor, if you hadn't saved my life."

"Well, listen. If ever you tell a soul on this earth, black or white, that I came here tonight to meet Miss Nellie, I swear by heaven I'll kill you, if it's the last act of my life! Do you hear?"

"Good God, doctor, don't talk that way!" There was an intensity in Allison's voice that terrified the darkey. "Doctor, I swear to God I won't never tell. No sir, not if I know they'll hang me if I don't."

"All right, then, I'll trust you; but remember!"

He reached out in the dark until he felt Allen's hand, and put two silver dollars into it. Allen jumped on his horse again, glad to be gone, and Allison went up to the cabin door. He hesitated, finally giving the required signal, and noticed that his lips trembled when he tried to whistle.

The door opened cautiously and he walked in. As the firelight fell full upon him, Nellie Barrett glided out of the shadows and put her hand in his, her eyes shining like stars at the pleasure of seeing him once again.

The room was delightfully warm and cheerful as compared with the bitter cold and blackness without, and Allison, half frozen as he was, when he had clasped Nellie's warm fingers in the rapture of meeting, crouched over the roaring fireplace to get the full benefit of its heat. The room was absolutely empty, except for themselves, two small wooden boxes, and a pile of wood near the hearth. The dark, rough walls were covered with dusty spiderwebs, dirt-dauber nests, and old wasp nests, that showed up conspicuously in the rosy light of the fire, and presented a sorry atmosphere of desolation. On the rude shelf over the fireplace a candle was sending up a dancing blaze to aid the flaming logs in dispelling the gloom.

While Allison warmed and dried the sleet from his coat and hat, Nellie sat down again upon one of the boxes near him. She was embarrassed, now that her lover was come, and the hundreds of ideas she had planned to exchange with him seemed all gone. Even the motive which had prompted her to send for him seemed unworthy of discussion, and she stared into the fire aimlessly. Allison, trying to be cheerful, and to put her at ease, took off his overcoat and leggings and hung them upon some nails he found driven into the wall. He drew the other box up to the hearth, close to her, and sat down, wondering if he might venture to take one the hands that lay idly in her lap, and clasp it as fondly as he loved it and its dear owner. He gazed into her troubled, downcast face, and dared not. A silence he would have given worlds to avoid seemed imminent, and he tried to escape from it.

"Won't you take your cloak and hood off?" he said, leaning nearer, and speaking so solicitously in his effort to appear indifferent that the the girl started and almost gave way to her trepidation. She looked up appealingly, and he went on: "I am afraid you won't feel the benefit of them when you go out into cold again."

Nellie looked at him still, scarcely conscious of his words. "Dr. Allison," she began, determined to be brave and end the embarrassment of their strained position; "Dr. Allison, I—I am afraid you think that I have lost my senses, sending for you to come to meet me here, but—but—" She lowered her eyes and her chin quivered. Tears of mingled self-pity and self-blame sparkled on her eye-lashes, and she proceeded desperately: "They are going to send me away, and—and—"

"What!" cried Allison, thoroughly aroused from self-consciousness. "Where are they going to send you? When?"

No more acting was necessary now. Both had forgotten themselves and everything else but each other. Nellie told him her mother's plans for forcing her into society, that she might be drawn from her heart-ache. Conversation flowed rapidly and smoothly, to drift from the serious matter of their parting into renewed promises of trust and hope.

Nellie had not seen her lover since several days before the unhappy interview with her father which ended all intercourse with him; and she had received no word, no message from him since his letter in reply to her own—the one she wrote him at her father's command.

When Dr. Allison wrote, he pleaded his love again, and begged her to trust in him and hope for the day when he would be able to overcome every objection now urged against him. This letter the young man enclosed, unsealed, in his answer to Mr. Barrett, and in the latter communication he told Nellie's father boldly how devotedly he loved her, and told him that he would never abandon hope of winning her as long as she was unmarried and he was possessed of physical strength to provide her with a home such as she merited.

Mr. Barrett's heart softened inwardly as he read the young man's nobly worded letter, so filled was it with high resolve and justified pride, but he nevertheless gratefully received Allison's promise that he would on no condition seek an interview with Nellie without his consent.

Mr. Barrett's stern letter stung Dr. Allison to the depth of his strong tempestuous nature, and left him benumbed by his crushed hopes and the knowledge that he could not see Nellie, nor even receive letters to lighten the sorrows of their enforced separation. He applied himself to study and work with every faculty

that his aching heart left him in command of, and proudly determining to give the elder man no excuse for harboring resentment toward him, he went to no house or place of amusement where he would be likely to meet Nellie. He longed to see her, daily—hourly,—and now that an opportunity to do so was thrust upon him, he felt no compunction in availing himself of it with all the ardor suppression engendered.

Nellie took off her cloak, and Allison hung it up for her; then he knelt down and took off her overshoes, placing them, with a delightful feeling of being her protector and advisor, where they would keep warm until they were needed.

He took his seat again, and at last obtained possession of her coveted hand; and this he caressed rebelliously, against Nellie's laughing protests, until she gave up all effort to dissuade him and abandoned it to his kisses.

"It is not yours," Allison asserted, his magnificent eyes and smiling, flushed face expressing all the pleasure the meeting was to him. "It is not yours at all. You gave this hand to me the night of the tournament ball, and you have since promised—yes, sworn to me that no one else shall have it!"

The moments flew on gilded wings, taking with them myriads of sweet nothings,—that are nothing, indeed, except when freighted with magnetic glances and melodious murmuring voices that in themselves are eloquent language to man and maid ensnared in the meshes of that cobweb fabric, cable-strengthened love. Rapture, as he watched her every movement, did not wholly blind the lover, and as he more closely studied the exquisite face before him, he saw that he was not the only one who had suffered. Nellie's cheeks were bright with color and her eyes sparkled, but Allison knew that it was pleasure's, not health's signet, for the

face had lost somewhat of its soft roundness and her dress—one he had often seen her wear before—was loose, and moved with her breathing. There was something besides which caught his attention, and made him solicitous. He spoke of this last.

"Ah," laughed Nellie, "your eyes and ears are too keen. This is only a little cold, and will soon pass away."

"Yes, it seems but a trifle," he said, reassuringly, "but I am afraid your coming out into the cold tonight will make it worse. You must promise me to take good care of my precious girl when I can't be with her, won't you?"

"Yes, I'll try," Nellie laughed.

"And I want you to promise to make her take some medicine, too," he persisted. "Won't you do that?" he asked with playful seriousness. Nellie laughed again and without waiting for her to promise or refuse Dr. Allison went to the wall where his overcoat hung, and taking a tiny medicine case from his pocket, he brought her a capsule of quinine. She took it from his hand and gazed wistfully into his eyes while he talked, hardly hearing what his directions for taking the medicine were. She smiled faintly when he had finished, and a little pained expression lingered about her mouth as she said:

"I wish you would give me something else, too."

"What?" he said lightly, yet awed by the pathos of her manner.

"You have given me something to make me well, now give me something to make me sick—too sick to leave home tomorrow." She laid her hand deprecatingly on his. "Can't you—won't you?"

Allison moved uneasily and tried to dispell her weird mood. She leaned forward eagerly, her eyes growing black and her cheeks paling.

"You don't know how strange I feel," she said earnestly. "I feel that I ought not—I *must* not go away from home tomorrow. Are you superstitious?" she queried. "Do you believe anything will happen to mother and father if I go away?"

Allison took both her hands protectingly in his and stroked them gently.

"My precious one, you are nervous and excited to-night. Waiting in this old house so long for me, alone, has had its effect upon your nervous system. You knew that it is haunted, didn't you," he said gaily, endeavoring to drive away her earnestness.

"Yes, I knew; that was why I chose it. Allen tried to scare me from coming, and he didn't stay one minute after he built the fire. I am not afraid of spirits or ghosts," she smiled, "although the rats and mice have made some strange noises in the next room—there's some corn stored in there—but that's not it; I'm not afraid of *that*, it's this strange feeling within that I dread. True, it is only since I have been here that it has come to me."

"You ought not to have come to this desolate place—"

"But," she said, looking at him, "I wanted to see you—"

"Darling! my precious, brave, sweet love!"

That she would endure so much for him, proved her love more more than all the verbal expressions he had ever coaxed from her and Allison knew no way to thank her as he wished. To be with her, to clasp her hand, to know that she loved him fondly, truly, despite her father's prejudice, made his happiness seem divine. He told her again of all his love, and she forgot her forebodings in the perfect joy of the moment. They talked of the future so bright with hope of dispelled difficulties and neither of them could or would believe that fate's decree had aught for them but bliss.

Nellie looked at her watch again and started up. "My," she cried, "how late it is! I must go at once."

Allison would gladly have detained her, but she shook her head and there was nothing for him to do but acquiesce. He assisted her on with cloak and rubbers, and assumed his overcoat.

He took his hat, and together they stood near the door, each reluctant to conclude the meeting which would be the last for many months. Allison looked down upon her. She was so pretty; so daintily, so plaintively sweet. She was going away, and he would see her no more for weary months.

Allison's heart beat so loudly, he thought she must hear it and guess its secret. He longed to take her in his arms, and enfolding her to his bounding heart, kiss her as fervently, as ardently as he loved her. He trembled and turned away.

Once he had yielded to his overmastering impulses and he dared not follow their dictates again. Once before, only a few days after the tournament, he visited her, and after three hours spent delightfully, the clock struck ten and he felt compelled to go. The night was so deliciously cool without, so warm within, that they had not gone into the house at all. Nellie was sitting on the gallery when he arrived and he sank into a chair beside her there.

The moon was so bright, the velvety breezes so dreamy, that Allison lingered, and having bade her good bye, they spoke of the night and its beauty—of anything to delay the parting.

Nellie leaned against a column that supported the roof; the mellow moonlight flooding about her and mingling in her soft white dress made it seem a part of its silver glow. The seductive roses at her belt and the penetrating fragrance floating about her from the garden, caught up the langorous mysticism of the South-

ern night and made her seem a spirit—a subtle breath of luxury.

She was pensive or laughing and vivacious by turns, thrilled with her new bliss and the mere joy of living.

Allison feasted his poetic nature upon her loveliness, enraptured. He said something about her being a siren who had ensnared his soul. He was standing near—recklessly near—and she lifted her face with a sparkling retort.

Before he realized what he was doing, he had caught her in his arms and was straining her to his bosom. His head sank until his lips were upon hers in fervid ecstasy. For a brief moment she seemed to him to be returning his caresses—then she bounded from his embrace and stood apart, her eyes flashing, her cheeks scarlet, her breath coming in quick, hard gasps.

He returned her gaze rebuked and miserable. There was nothing he would not have given to assuage her anger. There was nothing he could say or do. His first thought was to fall upon his knees at her feet and implore her forgiveness, but his tongue seemed numb. He turned and left her, unpardonable to himself, and feeling that he was one who deserved only banishment.

He rode moodily homeward, never knowing that what he mistook for anger was fear—dismay at the emotions that were electrically transmitted by his lips, his arms. Never knowing that he had ruthlessly touched a chrysalis and liberated a timid, pulsing butterfly—trembling with surprise, like one passing from dullness and gloom, awakened in a vista of radiant light, perfume, and music. They parted in misunderstanding,—he to go on his long ride to Lauren's, inwardly cursing the imp of mischief who had precipitated him into perpetual darkness, she to fly to the solitude of her own room, and there take refuge in woman's balm for over-taxed sensitiveness and cry herself to sleep.

When they met again, Allison saw her blush hotly and turn her eyes away. He was afraid to approach to crave the forgiveness he had resolved to ask, and she, noting that he shunned her, thought he deemed his deed unworthy of a second thought.

The breach was closed in time by assiduous attention to her slightest wish upon his part. She was keenly perplexed by it all, but she loved him so deeply, so tenderly that she soon ceased to question his love in return.

As he stood so near her now in the little isolated cabin near the woods, he yearned to take her in his arms none the less strongly. He longed to press her to his aching heart, but he dared not. He could not make her angry now—now that she was going away.

He took both her beautiful soft hands in his once again, and pressed them and kissed them gently. Nellie's head was bowed, and he stooped to see her face.

"My precious, my sweet, sweet love, you are going away—will you not let me kiss you, even if only once?"

Tear drops of sorrow, of keenest grief, rolled into the girl's eyes, and hung heavy upon her long lashes, but her lips were mute.

Allison bent his head still lower, and hesitated. She was so still, so silent. He pressed his lips lingeringly upon her own, once, twice, three times.

He blew the candle out, and coming back to where she was still standing, her head bent, he put her hand in his arm and they left the cabin, closing the door behind them.

CHAPTER XXI.

A big bay window in the front of the depot at Lauren's stared gloomily south across the railway track, and away east and west on either hand to where the track came to a point in the vague distance.

It was terribly cold. The mud out in the wagon-ruts was frozen as hard as brick, and Alligator Bayou was covered with a thick skin of ice strong enough to bear up a man's weight with ease. The depot roof, the platform, and the iron rails of the railroad, as well as the store and gin in the distance, were covered with a coating of sleet that made them gleam in the cold dawn and reflect the faint light stealing over the world as a herald of the coming day.

Long before its bearer could be heard, the lurid eye of the locomotive glowed afar off in the west, like an earth-bound star; motionless it seemed in its unswerving approach.

Nearer and louder the rumbling grew, and the powerful serpent, shrieking like a descending dragon of old, dashed through the ice-bound forest of the great swamps and drew up at the station, panting with impatience at the check put upon its flight. The engineer blew several short alarming calls; but the pulsing of his machinery was the only answering sound that broke the profound stillness of the dawn.

"Everybody asleep again," muttered the conductor to the brakeman, and the engineer blew a louder, shriller blast than before. The conductor waited in his snug caboose, but there was no sign of life without to be heard.

"I'll be switched if I can see how that fellow Minor

can sleep with all this racket going on," the conductor grumbled, with increasing irritation.

"Better go wake him up. I spect Mr. Minor's been takin' more Chris'mas aboard 'n what is good for him," the negro ventured.

"Looks like it." The conductor reluctantly climbed down from his compartment and walked along the crunching side-track. He ran up the whitened, slippery steps and knocked loudly upon the nearest door. The ice-glazed woods surrounding the plantation echoed the blows of his fist mockingly; the only sound belonging to the station was the musical crackling of a tall cottonwood tree, whose gaunt limbs were struggling to throw off their weight of ice to the winds as they blew through its branches.

He knocked again, louder than ever, and the woods echoed as before. He was getting cold, and he stamped his feet to warm them.

He knocked again, and turned to walk the length of the gallery to keep his blood in motion. He passed the bay window twice, and then idly turning his head in passing the third time, his attention was arrested by a dim light burning in the lamp hanging from the ceiling. As he noticed the light, he walked closer to the window and peered into the gloom of the room. It was so dark within that few articles were visible, but there was something on the floor that made him start in surprise and press his face to the wire netting stretched across the casement as protection to the glass; and as he gazed, a cry of horror burst from his lips.

The engineer and fireman, indifferently watching his movements from the cab, heard the conductor's exclamation, and read the expression upon his face as he turned and called to them excitedly. As they left their post and ran to their companion's assistance they were joined by several negroes, who came over to see

the train, from the wedding festivities still in progress at Parthenia's. As one man, the alarmed crowd pressed against the wire screen at the window, and beheld a sight that made lips blanch and blood run cold with awe.

Upon the floor, with his face toward the ceiling, lay Sidney Carroll, a dark stain spread about him from beneath his back.

"Dead!"

"Murdered!"

"Break open the door; perhaps we can save him. Where's Minor?"

"Go for Dr. Allison. Hurry! He sleeps in a room in the back of the store."

"What is Carroll doing here? He sleeps at the store, too, in a room adjoining the doctor."

Men talked wildly, and ran about like imbeciles. The door was strongly locked, and the key was on the inside. Some one brought an ax from the caboose and forced the door open, and just as they succeeded in gaining access to the interior of the building Dr. Allison came running, putting on his coat as he came.

The men crowded into the office, and the conductor stooped and lifted Carroll's head, but laid it back gently.

"No use, boys," he said, "it's all over."

Allison stood staring at the dead man like one in a dream. The conductor spoke to him twice before he answered.

"I asked," he repeated, "where is Minor?"

"Minor? Oh! I don't know. Isn't he in his room?"

The crowd moved toward Minor's room, that was back of the waiting-room on the left of the office, leaving Dr. Allison standing near Carroll, staring at his calm, peaceful face; but when they reached the

doorway they were met by a scene even more awful than the one they left behind them in the office. The room was small, and in the center, prone upon the floor, lay the body of Vincent Minor.

The bed was smooth, and everything else in the room seemed undisturbed. The men who came to the door stood there speechless with horror. The form they had left was awful, but it was mute. It told no tale, save of cruel murder. It lay upon its back, so calm that but for the pool of congealed blood lying thick about it, it might be there in tranquil sleep. But this one was eloquent with a pathos that made careless men hesitate in pain.

Nature's first powerful law was stamped in every line of the rigid, lifeless form. It fell as it had entered the room, face downward, with an outstretched hand almost within reach of a loaded gun standing against the wall.

The conductor roused himself. "Come, boys," he said softly. "Business is business. The train must go on, and the authorities in Asola must be notified as soon as possible."

The railroad men transacted no business at Lauren's Station that morning. The flat cars piled high with cotton bales, and the box cars loaded with seed, that stood awaiting their coming, were left standing where they were upon the side track, and the train pulled out and went on its way, leaving Dr. Allison alone with the dead.

Alone! For although dozens of negroes crowded about the bay window and gazed with superstitious dread upon the prostrate form of the man they knew so well, or sat around the stove in the waiting-room, there was no white man there from the departure of the train to the coming of the hand-car that brought the coroner and sheriff from Asola.

The office doors were closed when the trainmen left, and Allison took a chair and sat by the stove in the waiting-room adjoining. His breakfast was brought him there, and taken away again almost untasted.

Negroes came and went, sitting in the waiting-room or standing on the gallery talking in subdued tones, and Allison scarcely saw or heard them. Women and children passed back and forth, and whispered with the men, or to each other.

Howard Gully hardly left Dr. Allison's side from the time the murdered men were discovered, for any cause. He sat in a chair on the other side of the stove from him, and pretended to be asleep, to prevent others from talking to him. Melissa came in and spoke to him without attracting Dr. Allison's attention, until she said:

"Can't none of us do nothing with her. She's cried and cried, and keeps sayin', 'They's murdered my baby! they's murdered my baby!' till she looks like she'll 'most go crazy."

"Who are you talking about, Melissa?" Allison asked.

"About mama," the bride answered, coming over to where he sat. "I'm gettin' so worried about her, doctor."

"Poor Aunt Parthenia! She is worn out with her preparations for the wedding," Allison said, compassionately. He went over to the bench that ran along the wall, and taking up his medicine bags from where he had left them the evening before, he measured out some medicine and gave it to the girl. "Carry this to Aunt Parthenia, and tell her to take it; then make her lie down. Your mother needs rest, and must go to bed. Have you had any sleep yourself?"

"No sir. We was still dancin' when the train come, and some of the men who wanted to see it, come over,

and run back to tell us about what had happened. I was so scared I started over here just like I was, but mama made me change my dress, then me an' her come on just as quick as we could."

"Go, then, and go to sleep. Howard, you go too. If I need anything, I'll send for you; there will be plenty of men here all day."

"La, doctor, I don't need no sleep!" protested Howard, scornfully. "I can sit up all night, and do my work next day as good as the best of 'em. You go, though, Lissy," he urged, turning to the girl. "You and Aunt Parthenia is plumb tuckered out." He followed his new-made wife to the gallery, and added in a lower tone, "I don't want to leave doctor; he looks so 'stressed. He might need me, and, you know, I'm the only 'pen'ence he's got. 'Sides, the coroner will git here directly."

"Is you had your brekafas'?"

"I don't want nothin'. I was eatin' more supper when the train come."

"There's some hot coffee in the kitchen."

"Nem mind. I don't want nothin'."

Melissa went back to her mother, who sat in the kitchen belonging to the young men's apartments at the store, still crying and sobbing, and Gully went again to his seat in the waiting-room.

Two darkies sitting on a bench near a window were discussing the merits of their respective coon dogs, and further in the room another was telling of his deer hunt the Saturday before Christmas. There was the hum of voices all around the place, but the hush prevailing told of the presence of that mighty, ultimate victor of all breathing things.

Outside, standing near a cotton car, with the winter sun shining upon them, was a little group of darkies talking earnestly. They were intimate friends, and

had withdrawn to this secluded place to exchange their views in privacy. All of them were tenants on the place, who had lived there, some of them, half a lifetime, and all of them long enough to learn to like the two murdered men sincerely. The men shivered and stuck their hands deeper into their pockets as the keen north wind swept over and around their protecting car and whistled in their ears. The tragedy which had been enacted while they reveled in the delights of feasting and dancing not five hundred yards away, filled their simple, superstitious brains with a dread that was paralyzing.

"Lord, Lord, Lord, who could a-done it? Who could have done such a terrible deed?" old Bob muttered for the twentieth time since he had looked upon that cruel scene in the depot. He shook his gray head mournfully from side to side, and groaned.

"Unc' Bob, you keeps a askin' that question, and God knows I'd like to git it answered," said a middle-aged man named Rufus. He had a thoughtful yellow face, expressive of more than the average amount of negro intellect. He moved about uneasily, and after casting a hurried glance over his shoulder, leaned forward and spoke tentatively:

"Gent'men," he said, "I been thinkin' hard this mawnin', and I keeps a-wonderin' what made Doctor git so mad with Mr. Sidney las' night. I never seen Doctor so mad before in all my life."

The man who was standing nearest him started back as if Rufus had dealt him a blow. "God A'mighty, Rufus, is you stark crazy?" he cried. "Good Lord, man, don't you never say nothin' like that agin as long as you live!"

"'Scuse me, Bill," Rufus returned, contritely. "'Fore God, I never meant nothin'; I was just a-thinkin'."

"Well, man, keep your thinkin' to yourseff," Bill

answered excitedly, almost angrily. "God A'mighty. nigger, if such talk was to git out—"

"Bill, you don't understan' me," Rufus explained, worried. "I knowed I was talkin' 'mongst my frien's and Doctor's frien's. God knows, man, I'd keep my mouth shut till it growed together, 'fore I'd say the word that would git Doctor into trouble."

"Of course you would, Rufus; of course you would. Bill knows that as well as any of us does," interposed old Bob, hurriedly. He raised his horny old hand and scratched the white wool beneath his hat. "Gent'men," he went on, "hit gen'ly takes old Bob a long time to turn anything over in his mind, but here, sence you all been talkin', it's come to me, there ain't nothin' in what Rufus says. I tell you, gent'men, sirs, Doctor ain't de kin' of man what hits another in de back."

"You mighty right!" several of the group declared positively.

"No sir!" went on Bob with confidence. "Ef Doctor got anything 'agin you, he's goin' up to your face—you hear me?"

"Yes, Lawd!"

"I just tell you what's a fack," Bill asserted, stoutly. "Doctor's one of them kind what don't know what 'scared' means."

"Now your shoutin'!" Bob declared approvingly. He went on reflectively: "Mr. Sidney was a good friend to me and Lord knows I'm sorry he come by his death like he did, but he certn'y could be aggravatin' when he sot hisseff to tease; spec'ly when he was about half full."

"Unc' Bob, Mr. Carroll was all right last night. He was as sober as a judge; him and Mr. Minor both. I was in de sto' when Gully come over and tol' 'em Aunt Parthenia said 'Come on,' and Mr. Minor says, says he: 'Shall we take somethin' before we go over,' and Mr.

Carroll thowed his head up, and winked jist so, he did, an' says: 'No, sir, I never drinks when I'm goin' in the presence of ladies!' Rufus you seen him, you was right there."

"Hyah, ha, ha!" the group chorused appreciatively.

"Wasn't that just like him now?" Bob said, rubbing his hands together. "Ha, ha! Mr. Sidney would a had his joke ef hit was at his own fun'al!"

A sudden recollection of the cold, stark figure on the floor there, so near, struck him with remorse, and crest-fallen at his momentary levity, two big tears gathered in his withered eyes and coursed slowly down his wrinkled cheeks. He shook his head to throw them off and tried to keep his weakness undetected, but there was no need to conceal his tears, for the other eyes were bent resolutely upon the frozen ground and only stern determination on the part of the men who owned them kept them dry.

At eleven o'clock the coroner and several gentlemen came on a hand-car, and the inquest was held, resulting a verdict of murder by some person or persons unknown; then the coroner and all but two of his party returned to Asola, and these two waited with Dr. Allison until the west bound train arrived bringing the committees sent by the Knights of Pythias and Knights of Honor to prepare the bodies for burial and care for them until the grief-stricken relatives could arrive.

Next day Col. Laurens came up from New Orleans, bringing with him a man to take Carroll's place as manager of the plantation, and also a detective upon whom all hopes were turned for the unraveling of the dire mystery.

The detective looked wise and hung about the station several days; then scraped the black alluvial soil from his shoes and went back to New Orleans, having thrown no light whatever upon the tragedy.

In the meantime, the parish authorities were doing their best to discover the murderer. Several negroes who bore unenviable reputations or who were supposed capable of bearing animosity toward the unfortunate men were arrested and taken to jail in Asola to await the January term of court.

That robbery was the motive for the crime seemed improbable, for there was a large sum of money in the office safe, which contained the plantation deposits as well as the railroad moneys; after the men were killed, no attempt had been made to enter the depot.

Minor and Carroll were wild, intemperate fellows, but they were universally liked and had many warm friends throughout the parish, and no one knew of any act of their's that could warrant a revenge so cold-blooded, so dastardly as that they should be shot in the back through a window, when they were evidently quietly at work in their office.

CHAPTER XXII.

When court convened a week or two later, the grand jury took up the case and examined the negroes who had been arrested upon suspicion. This jury, composed of seven negroes and five white men, the foreman being one of the latter, questioned one after another of the prisoners without eliciting any evidence that could either incriminate them or point to a solution of the mystery. The foreman was baffled, and was becoming exasperated. The last darkey was brought in, and feeling that he was wasting time and gaining nothing for his pains, the foreman turned to him in disgust and said:

"I suppose you were at that eternal wedding, too, like everybody else?"

"Yes, sir, I was da."

"And nothing happened, I suppose,—nothing at all out of the ordinary? You saw nothing and heard nothing calculated to surprise you? Nothing astonished you while you were there?"

The negro shifted his weight from one leg to the other, and scratched his head in perplexity as he stared stupidly at the foreman. He could not comprehend his sarcasm, but he did understand his words, and answered somewhat at random:

"Well, boss, dere sho' did somethin' happen what 'stonished me."

The foreman stopped drumming on the table and looked up.

"Well?"

"Yes, sir. You see, boss, hit was dis way. Me an' my ole lady was stannin' at de fur eend of de table fom

Br'er Claibon an' de bride an' Gully; an' close like to de little table over in de corner what Sis Parthenia had sot dere fur de white gent'men fom de sto'. Hit was like so: I was a-stannin' like here, wid ole Unc Johnson Clipper on my right han' side, an' my ole lady on my lef' han' side, and Burrill Coleman he was right at de eend of de table 'zackly, an' I was a-stannin' so as evry time I looked up I could see dem white gent'men just a-laughin' an' a-havin' of more fun to deyselves 'n a little! An' bimeby, sir, I looked up ('cos I was mighty busy wid a turkey wing, I was, sir, 'cos dat supper of Sis Parthenia pintedly was good eatin')—but as I was sayin', boss, bimeby I looked up, 'cos I heerd de Doctor say, kind a laughin', he did, an' he says, says he: 'I swear you won't!' An' den Mr. Carroll kep' a-devilin' him, he did, jus' like he allus done eve'ybody—he kep' on wid his foolishness, sir, twel de Doctor jumped up, sir, he did, jest as mad as a hornet, an' he says: 'Sidney, ef you say another word, I'll blow your brains out!' and den, sir, he jest marched outen de do', sir, wid his head sot up in dat proud way a hisen, an' I never seen him no mo' twel nex' day."

The white men on the jury exchanged anxious glances.

"Did the rest of you fellows see and hear all this?" the foreman asked.

"Yes, sir," some of the negroes answered, in various tones of surprise.

"Why didn't you say something about it then?"

"I never thought about it," one prisoner answered.

"Lawd," said another, "de murder clean knocked all of dat outen my head."

After putting a few more pointed questions, the foreman ordered the prisoners returned to jail.

That afternoon the sheriff went to Lauren's Station, and Edward Allison was arrested on charge of the murder of Sidney Carroll and Vincent Minor.

The news flew like wild-fire, and consternation was intense.

Dr. Allison made no opposition when the sheriff told him why he had come. He stared at him hard for a few moments, as if doubting his own senses, and then he told him he was ready to go.

The eight-mile trip was made quickly and pleasantly enough, for Captain Barringer, the sheriff, talked upon general topics as entertainingly as was his habit, and Allison almost forgot why he was with him, until the strong brick jail, near the Asola court-house, came into view. He shuddered and turned his face away.

As they got off the hand-car in Asola, Captain Barringer looked calmly at his prisoner and said with his brisk cordiality:

"Doctor, I invite you to be my guest for a few days. Of course you understand that I must keep you under surveillance, for form's sake, but I can't put you over there with the negroes, you know."

Allison grasped the speaker's hand and pressed it warmly, unable to express his gratitude, and the two walked together silently.

Dr. Allison had never visited at the Sheriff's house nor met Mrs. Barringer, and he flushed hotly when the introduction was performed; but Mrs. Barringer greeted him so naturally, with so much easy grace, that he was relieved of much of the embarrassment that meeting her under such trying circumstances entailed, and supper being announced soon afterward, the remainder of the evening passed in agreeable conversation.

Dr. Allison enjoyed all of the attention due a guest, but he was none the less a prisoner. Captain Barringer occupied his room with him at night, and at no time during the day was he or one of his deputies further than arm's length from him.

The case was not to be called for several days, and in

the interim greatest interest was manifested as to what the result of the trial would be. When taken before the grand jury, Dr. Allison had refused to give any account of himself from the time of his leaving the table at the wedding supper to the moment when he was called to the depot after the train arrived. His friends were anxious when his attitude before the grand jury became known, and those who knew him only slightly shook their heads gravely. That instinct in human nature, always prompt to accept the worst view of a fellow creature's character, was quick to take the hint, and, setting aside everything that had gone before to the contrary, attributed motives for the prisoner's silence that argued against him. His former friends extended to him the usual hand-clasp, but his sensitive instincts were not slow to divine that deep in every man's heart there rankled a doubt, a suspicion, that he might be a murderer of the vilest type.

It was in the afternoon of the third day of his arrest—after the grand jury had found a true bill against him—that he sat with Captain Barringer in the latter's sitting-room trying to read. The door opened and the Syrian stood before him. Both gentlemen were surprised at the peddler's abrupt entrance, and the sheriff, who knew her well, arose and asked with his kindly courtesy:

"Ah, Miss Mene, you wish to see the Madam? Come this way; I think you will find her engaged with household affairs in the kitchen."

"No, no," the woman answered, in her soft foreign intonations, as she waved him off; "I saw the lady; she tell me I come in."

She put her satchels upon the floor near the doorway, and stood pinning and unpinning her shawl, abstractedly. "I not want to sell," she went on, and then hesitated, turning her weird black eyes first to

one and then the other. "No, I not sell; I want to see Doctor."

"Ah, yes," the sheriff said. "One of your patients, Doctor."

"Yes," Omene said, quickly, "you go, Cappitin; I want to see Doctor."

Barringer hesitated. "Dr. Allison, I can leave the room if you wish, but for your sake, as well as mine—"

"No, Captain, do not leave the room. Do not lay yourself open to criticism," Allison answered quickly. "I will take her to this window, and she can tell me what she wants."

He saw as soon as he had spoken that the woman was not satisfied, but there was no alternative. He could not imagine what induced her to come to him, for though he had seen her often in her wandering from cabin to cabin, he had never heard of her being sick.

The woman followed him to the window furthest from the fireplace, where Barringer sat, and dropped upon the floor in oriental fashion, her back against the curtain and her eyes turned so that she could watch every movement the sheriff made. There was a large armchair between him and Dr. Allison, that she had pushed there in passing, seemingly accidentally. She motioned to a low chair, and Allison brought it and sat down facing her.

"Make believe," she whispered, holding up her wrist.

Allison bent forward and took her calm, dark wrist. As he brought his head close to her own, she fixed her glowing oriental eyes upon upon him and asked, intently:

"Why don't you tell?"

Allison looked at her questioningly.

"Where you were when the murder was done," she went on, holding him with her gaze.

Allison started. "What do you mean?" he asked, coldly.

"I mean you must tell."

"I can not tell," he said, dully.

"Then Omene will."

"What!"

"Hush," she said quickly, "not so loud. I know—I know all, everything."

"You? Good heavens! Who has told you?"

Omene warned him again.

"I was there—there before she came. I often sleep there when I can't get back. I was there," she repeated; "I know."

Allison covered his face with his hands and groaned.

"Sh—! You will tell, now," she said, nodding her head complacently, "and then you be free."

He grew white to the lips. "No, no! My God! don't you see I can't?"

The woman looked at him in amazement, and then slowly reading his eyes, and the color that flashed for an instant in his face, she sat still, thinking deeply. At last she looked into his face wonderingly, and mused, half to herself:

"I don't see," she said slowly. "I was there all the time. You can prove by me. I saw everything, and heard everything. I tell; it be all right. You marry her, see?" She smiled at her happy solution of the difficulty.

"I *can't* marry her," he whispered back; "her father won't let me. That was why she sent for me. Didn't you say you heard all she said?"

"Yes," the woman said, in her quaint, musical way, "but I didn't see how she mean."

Suddenly a bright thought seemed to strike her, and her eyes sparkled gaily.

"Ah! you tell, then he have to let her marry you."

He laughed—laughed almost hysterically, and fell into despondency deeper than ever; and Omene was serious.

“You must tell,” she pleaded; “they might—” she broke off suddenly.

“Yes, I know,” he said, bitterly, “they may hang me, or, worse, they may imprison me for life.” He took the woman’s hand and pressed it gratefully. It was balm to him to have sympathy, and, better still, trust like hers, even from one so lowly. “Thank you, my friend,” he said, “for trying to help me, but you see how impossible it is. If you only knew how wretched my position is! Still, there is no hope. You are good to try, but nobody can help me now.”

The woman muttered something in her own language, and looked at him severely. “You will break her heart,” she muttered in vexation. “She love you—ah, she love you so good!”

Allison groaned. “Yes, she loves me, but she is young; she will forget that when it is all over; but she could not forget, could never forgive, if I wounded her honor.”

The woman flashed her eyes at him indignantly.

“Ah! you would save *her*,—you forget your mother—you will kill her to save the girl!”

Allison bounded to his feet and paced the room in an agony of thought. He walked back and forth, blind and deaf to everything present but his own misery, and the woman waited for him to return. He threw himself into the chair and leaned toward her again.

“For God’s sake, leave me!” he moaned. “You will drive me mad. I can not tell; I can not cause my precious love one moment’s shame—she is so good, so true! My mother, my noble, self-sacrificing mother! Would to God I had died before this curse ever fell upon us!”

He buried his face in his hands and sat crushed by the weight of relentless woe that he could not avert. He raised his head and took the woman's hand gently.

"If they do their worst, go to my mother and tell her the truth. Go to my heart's treasure and tell her that my love for her is proven; then tell her to forget. You will take pity on me and do this for me?"

Omene heard him in a conflict of sympathy and annoyance.

"I go first," she said, "and tell the judge."

Allison clutched her hand he held almost fiercely.

"No, for God sake, no! If you tell, she would have to bear all the blame. She must not suffer, whatever else may happen!"

"Ah, she is a woman; she will suffer more if you are—"

"But telling will do no good," he interrupted vehemently, "we will only drag her name into the courts and avail nothing. We can not prove my innocence."

"Won't they take my word—mine and Allen's? Make Allen tell too."

"But we cannot prove anything even then."

"You did not get back in time."

"Yes, I did. I had unsaddled my horse and was nearly ready for bed when the train whistled. I heard them knocking on the depot door before they came to mine."

The woman clapped her hands excitedly, and Allison in turn signaled her to be cautious. She leaned nearer and whispered triumphantly:

"They were dead, cold, stiff, when the train came. Didn't you hear them say so?"

Again Allison bounded to his feet and struggled with a cry for self-preservation, that was almost maddening.

Captain Barringer sat behind his paper and tried to neither see nor hear anything that passed. He pitied

the young man, so cruelly accused, from the bottom of his heart. He believed it impossible that a man, such as he knew Allison to be, could be guilty of any deed in the least dishonorable, and that he could commit a crime so atrocious as the murder at Laurens he believed beyond all possibility.

Again Allison sank into his chair. He had calmed himself and he spoke firmly :

"Heaven knows I am grateful to you for your sympathy and for your offer of help, but I can not, I must not take it. She must be spared whatever may happen to me. Promise me to let the matter rest now ; promise me that you will never tell that she met me in the cabin."

Omene arose to her feet. Without turning her head to right or left, she went to the door, and picking up her satchels, she glided out of the room and out of the house.

Two days later Allison's case was tried. Some of his friends urged him to have it delayed, but he was apathetic and seemed so hopelessly indifferent as to when his sentence was passed, that they left him in despair. The district attorney and judge, both of whom knew and liked Allison, endeavored to persuade his lawyer to have the case postponed, and attributed the young lawyer's stout refusal to his ignorance and youth, and mentally accused him of criminal indifference toward his client's welfare.

"Well," muttered the judge, with a sigh, when he saw that the lawyer was obdurate, "it will simply amount to your hanging the poor fellow! While public opinion is against him, there is very little hope for his acquittal."

Young Mr. Lee, the lawyer, shrugged his shoulders in that lazy way peculiar to him, and drawled :

"Well, Judge, if this jury feels disposed to hang him

upon circumstantial evidence, then we will have to take the case to a higher court."

Mr. Lee was not an orator, and this fact added to the distress of Allison's friends. He sadly lacked the flow of language necessary for swaying an audience; but if he did not have the gift of using his tongue, he had the more blessed faculty of holding it. He was excellent in civil courts, because his understanding of the law was unquestionable, but he always refused to take criminal cases when it was possible for him to do so, and only took this one because of his genuine friendship for the accused man.

The court-house was crowded with a motley throng of white men and darkies of both sexes. Almost every man and woman on Lauren's plantation had walked the eight miles of railroad track for the ghoulish pleasure of being present at the trial.

And there in the court-room, the same apartment where he had been so care-free and happy as the accepted lover of Nellie Barrett, Edward Allison stood to answer to the charge of murder.

The district attorney examined the negroes who had testified against him before the grand jury, and they told the same story over again, describing Allison's anger and repeating his hotly spoken words, amid a prolixity of unnecessary description, but nothing more could be learned from them. None of them knew the cause of the doctor's sudden outburst, nor anything further of him than that he left the supper-table very angry. Sidney Carroll and Vincent Minor had gone to Parthenia White's house, and stood in the doorway for a while looking at the dancers, and Minor was overheard to say that he had to make out some bills of lading for cotton and seed; and Carroll saying that he would go and help him, the two went off together, and no one thought of them again until the train arrived.

Dr. Allison listened attentively at first to what the negroes were saying, and after two or three men had repeated the same thing in their characteristic long-drawn-out manner, his mind wandered, and he sat staring at the floor, thinking of the bliss and pain that had been his portion since last he was in that room. His thoughts lingered about Nellie's sweet, girlish face and her charming womanliness; she was to him his materialized ideal of all human goodness and purity. At their last interview she told him that her father had forbidden her writing to him, but he knew that she had reached her destination safely, for she had sent him a newspaper with the mention of her arrival marked.

There was a murmur in the court-room, and Allison was aroused from his reverie. He looked up, and his blood seemed to freeze in his veins. There upon the witness-stand stood Omene Kirrch, the Syrian.

Allison started to his feet and clutched his attorney by the arm. "For God's sake," he whispered, "stop that woman, Lee,—she will kill me!"

Mr. Lee pressed him back in his chair and commanded: "Sit still, Ed,—calm yourself; some one may notice your agitation."

Allison bowed his head in his hand and groaned.

Omene Kirrch never once looked at Allison. When she took the oath, he lifted his head and riveted his eyes upon her dark, sad face. Once or twice, beneath his gaze, her eyelids fluttered and she almost turned her head toward him; but she struggled against the impulse, and answered the questions put to her with composure and cool confidence. She always spoke with a strong foreign accent, despite her long residence in America, but she had a good command of language and seldom hesitated for a word to express her thoughts.

"Where was Dr. Allison the night of the murder?" she repeated slowly in her plaintive, musical voice,

whose peculiarities could never be described by pen. "At twelve o'clock he came to a cabin on the back part of Lilyditch plantation."

For an instant Allison covered his face with his hands in agony of fear; but the fascination that the awful revelation she was about to make had for him made him lift his head and gaze at her again. Young Lee moved his chair even nearer, and laid his hand with apparent carelessness upon his client's knee.

"What was Dr. Allison doing at Lilyditch on December 27th at twelve o'clock?" asked the District Attorney, and Allison shuddered.

"He was sent for to see a woman," the Syrian answered simply.

"How do you know this?"

"I was in the house with her."

"What were you doing there?" was the next question.

"I was staying all night. I often sleep there when I can't get back where I board."

"Ah! Where is the woman now who sent for the doctor? Why did she not come, too, to testify in the prisoner's favor?"

"She went away next day to New Orleans."

"Hump! How was she able to go New Orleans next day if she was sick enough to send ten miles for a physician at midnight?"

"She was able to walk," Omene said, with a shrug of her shoulders.

"Yet you say Dr. Allison was sent for and gave her medicine at midnight?"

Dr. Allison sat like one in a trance, and listened to the woman in helpless amazement.

"Yes, he came and gave her medicine."

"How long did he stay with her?"

"Three and a half hours."

"How do you know?"

The Syrian drew a little silver watch from her bosom and held it up.

"What was the matter with the woman?"

Allison leaned forward eagerly to hear what she would say. For the first time she turned her head and looked at him, a plaintive little smile hovering for an instant about her thin lips.

"She sick here," she answered, pressing her hand to her bosom. "She got—how you call that?—sick heart; pain all the time. She worse that night."

"Is the sick woman a negro?"

Allison would have bounded to his feet at the question had not Lee's restraining hand detained him.

"No," answered Omene, curtly.

"Ah, a peddler like you?"

Omene shrugged her shoulders and made a little grimace of contempt, followed by a gurgling laugh that was almost gay.

"Oh, no," she said. "You don't find peddlers like Miss Mene every day. She sell something sometime, but—" She laughed again in child-like amusement.

"What was the woman's name?"

Allison shrank as though he expected a blow. "My God, stop her!" Cold perspiration burst upon his brow, and his lips blanched whiter still.

Omene saw him, but never wavered:

"Cornelia Barretti," she said, pronouncing the old Roman name and the modern one with a soft, liquid accent that showed them natives of a foreign land. Allison looked at Mr. Barrett, sitting across the room near Jules Durieux, and listening intently to the evidence, and he almost shouted in relief.

"How did she go to New Orleans?"

"By boat."

"How did she go to the boat?"

"I don't know. I left the cabin to do my work before she went to the boat."

"How do you know, then, that she went to New Orleans?"

Omene looked at her interlocutor with withering surprise.

"She said she was going, and I heard she was gone, and I have not seen her since. Han!" she concluded, with a sniff.

The District Attorney cross-questioned her untiringly, but her answers were straight and simple, and always the same thing. He sat down and mopped the perspiration from his brow. He had done his duty, and no one could accuse him of not having put forth every effort to convict the prisoner. At heart he knew of no man whom he liked more cordially than he did Edward Allison—no one whom he would do more for if it lay in his power.

When Dr. Allison was questioned his voice rang out without a tremor, "I am *not* guilty."

He said that every word the woman had uttered was true. He had been sent for to see a woman on Lilyditch plantation; that he had gone, and he had given her medicine. He stayed with her three and a half hours, or thereabout, and then rode home rather slowly, owing to the mud having frozen and become painful to his horse's feet. He must have reached Lauren's about half-past five. It was dark everywhere, except in Parthenia's house, where the negroes were still dancing. He unsaddled his horse himself, and went to his room to prepare for bed, and had just gotten into bed when some one knocked on the door and called him. He told this standing before that crowd of curious, suspicious people, with head erect and his eyes calmly watching the Judges' faces, and then he sat down and refused to speak again.

Mr. Lee arose to his feet when Allison sat down, and addressed the jury. The twelve were all white men, and he spoke to them in his habitual deliberate manner. He asked them to question Edward Allison's conduct from the time he had come to live in the parish up to the present moment. He asked them if they would convict a man who had always borne himself as a gentleman and as a man of honor, upon circumstantial evidence, or upon the report of negroes who had seen him display irritability upon an occasion when none knew the cause of his anger. He asked all present who knew the disposition of the man who caused his vexation, to reflect upon the difference in the two men. He asked them upon what grounds a man who had never been known to show cowardice or malice would be likely to shoot another in the back and through a window at midnight? Not robbery, for no one knew better than the accused the amount of money in the safe, and moreover, the accused knew the safe combination, for it was he who opened the doors for the new man who was sent by the railway company to take charge of the office.

The counsel for the defense then urged a point which the district attorney had failed to touch upon. In the glass of the bay window had been found holes in two of the panes, and these proved conclusively that two pistols were fired simultaneously. These two holes were too far apart for it to be possible for one man to have made them at the same instant, and the fact that the bullets had entered both of the dead men from the back indicated that they had each received the death-wound before either could turn about in alarm. If one person had discharged both shots, he could have had no possible motive for changing his position from one side of the window to the other, when either aperture gave him complete range of the entire room. Only

two balls were found in the post mortem examination; one of these was of .38 calibre and the other was of .44.

Mr. Lee grew almost eloquent as he warmed with the hope of proving beyond all peradventure that Edward Allison was an innocent man.

The two shots that were fired, he asserted, were discharged by two men at the same moment, resulting in Mr. Carroll's instant death and in Mr. Minor receiving the death-wound which did not cause him to fall until he reached the center of his own apartment, whither he had gone for a weapon to use in self-defense. He believed that the murder was committed for the purpose of robbery, just as was the case in the many crimes committed in Mississippi within the past few months. That robbery was not effected in this instance was due to Mr. Minor having lived until he reached the other apartment, and the robbers, supposing him to be concealed, prepared to defend himself, dared not attempt to enter the building.

As for arresting Dr. Allison in the first place, he indignantly asserted that it was preposterous. Dr. Allison's character was too well known to require any remarks from him upon it, he said, and that in itself should serve to clear him of all suspicion, even without the testimony of the woman just heard in his favor, accounting for every moment of his time from when he sat at supper with his two friends to the moment when the train arrived. He ate supper at ten o'clock, according to the statement of the colored witnesses, and left the room, angry, perhaps; just outside he met the colored boy who had come to take him to the house where the woman who wanted him was. The roads were muddy and beginning to freeze and the Doctor could not possibly ride the distance of ten miles in less than two hours. He reached the woman's side and stayed with her until half past three o'clock, returning

to the station, reaching there at half past five. He had just gotten into his bed more nearly frozen than otherwise, when the train came, followed by the startling knock upon his door and the appalling information that Mr. Carroll was dead. The railway conductor, the fireman, the engineer, and brakeman had testified that the two men were cold and rigid in death, and the temperature was at freezing point in the office when they were found. The fire in the stove was burnt out to the last spark. The lamp was still burning with a faint blue flame, and the odor from it was strong, as of a lamp left burning all night.

* * * * * * *

Friends crowded about Dr. Allison and his successful lawyer when Allison was pronounced a free man, and congratulations were showered upon them both, but still—. *Why* had Dr. Allison refused so positively to account for his whereabouts the night of the murder, until after the peddler had given in her testimony?

A short time later Allison went on a visit to his mother at the old home, and remained there several weeks. When he came back, he took up his work at Lauren's and was soon on pleasant terms of friendship with his new associates. The new manager and depot agent liked him immensely, but still—.

CHAPTER XXIII.

The wind was raging like a maniac, and the humid cold seemed to penetrate the marrow of her bones! Ella struggled through the icy mud, dreading every minute that the next would find her horse bogged to its knees, or, escaping this, that they would be rolling together in the slush, unable to regain a footing in the blackness of the night. Her eyes were utterly useless to her, and she could not even see her horse's head nor her hand held up before her. She trusted to the faithful little animal's instincts, and coaxed her forward with endearing terms to do her best for the sake of both. Poor little Betty was not cold, for her struggle with the mud kept every drop of blood and every muscle in her body in motion; but the negro girl was suffering acutely with the pain of cold in her aching hands and feet and fatigue throughout her weary limbs. She knew that she could not be far from home now—or at least ought not to be; but now and then she wondered, with a sickening fear, if it were possible that Betty had lost her way. The girl began to feel a numbness stealing over her that was fast driving out fear, when all at once the mare gave a little cry of delight that roused her from her lethargic indifference with a laugh for joy, and at that moment a flood of light streamed through an open cabin door. The horse whinnied again, and dogs bounded out to meet her, barking a happy welcome, and the girl realized that she was at home.

Her grandmother came to her assistance, and helping her from the horse, led the poor worn beast to the little stable, where she fed her, taking off the saddle and

giving her the freedom she so well deserved, while Ella hastened into the cabin and crouched down by the fire.

As she sank upon the hearth her little boy tottered toward her in his newly learned walk, expecting her to laugh and pet him in her habitual rapturous way; but the girl stared into the fire, scarcely conscious that he was near. She shivered, and received his kisses without noticing his happy prattle till he stumbled over her cloak, that had fallen from her, and cried piteously, feeling wounded by her neglect. She caught him in her arms then, and kissed him passionately, cooing to him; and having soothed him, she caressed his chubby little hand that he held up to her face, while he nursed himself to sleep.

Old Harmony took the boy from Ella and put him in bed.

"Come on, honey, an' git yo' supper. Ain't you mighty tired?"

"Grandma, I'm most tired to death," the girl said, her large eyes staring plaintively, "and it seems like I never will git warm no mo'. La, grandma," she went on, as she took the plate the old darkey brought her, "what made you fix all this stuff for me. I don't believe I could eat anything to save my life—I just wanted some good hot coffee, or something, to warm me up."

"Now, honey, you try to eat," the old woman coaxed, "I got yo' gran'pa to go kill you dat pattige jest 'cause I knowed you didn't have no appetite."

The girl forced some of the partridge into her mouth and swallowed it with an effort, and the old woman watched her with distress plainly marked upon her patient yellow face.

Ella drank the coffee greedily, and Harmony, disappointed, took the things away. When she returned the girl was coughing violently, and she laid her hand caressingly upon her shoulder.

"Honey, you go to bed right dis minit! Yo' cough is a heap wuss, an' you looks plumb done up."

"Lawd, grandma, I wish I could, but my work ain't done yet!" the girl answered, sadly grave. "I wish I could go to bed. I got to go on, though, jes' as soon as I can. He expectin' me ev'ry minit now. I jes' stopped by to 'tend to the baby, so the little fellow could git to sleep in peace an' not bother you."

"You jes' can't go no further, child," Harmony asserted emphatically, "you 'most sick as it is. You know he wouldn't have you go on out there for de worl' ef he knowed how tired you wus."

The girl shook her head wearily.

"Yes he would, grandma. You don't know how he's changed. He's cross most all the time, an' God knows, grandma, I tries to please him!"

She looked up pathetically through the tears that crowded into her eyes. She brushed them away resolutely the next moment as the harsh little clock on the mantle-piece struck ten.

"Goodness," she cried, "I didn't have no idee it was so late!"

She got up stiffly and put on her cloak. Harmony went with her to the stable. Betty had finished her supper and was dozing in her stall. Ella had her saddled and led her out to the edge of the gallery where she could mount, and soon they started out on the lonely road in the darkness. The ground had commenced to freeze at sunset and since she had left the road an hour or two before, it had hardened so perceptibly that the ice cut the horse's feet like iron, as she slipped through the crusts to the softer mud below.

Ella turned and laboriously retraced her way. She put Betty again in the stable, and went into the house for a lantern.

Harmony looked up as she came in and asked the question with genuine distress in every tone:

"Oh, child, what made you turn back?"

"I know it's bad luck," the girl answered, dully, "but I couldn't help it, grandma; I just couldn't kill the po' li'l' hoss, anyway."

She started again, and with the aid of a candle burning dimly in the lantern, she could pick her way along the ditch bank where the ground was hard.

"Maybe it's best," she said to herself. "I won't git so cold walkin'."

She drew her shawl closer about her ears, and pushed forward bravely.

In a small single cabin, almost in the centre of Englehart, Burrill Coleman sat all alone. The one room of the house and the shed room at the back were as comfortably furnished and as neat as negro homes are usually, which after all is saying very little, although Coleman lived by himself and did all the housework needed in his small establishment.

Tonight he got up often and went to the door, where he peered into the darkness, listening intently, only to return again and drop into his chair before the fire. He could not sit still and again went to the door and looked out impatiently, but closed it in the face of the keen wind, and returned to his chair once more. He pulled out his watch and looked at its slowly moving hands with an oath.

Just as he snapped its case and was returning it to his pocket, a soft tap sounded without; he jumped up and unbolted the door, throwing it wide open, and Ella Green, almost fainting with fatigue and numb with cold, staggered in.

"At last! My Lawd, Ella," he cried peevishly, "what on earth makes you so late? I was scared somethin' had happened to you."

"I couldn't make it no sooner," the girl answered

meekly, going to the fire and crouching down before it. "I most thought I couldn't make it nohow."

"Humph, you gittin' mighty delicate all of a sudden!" Coleman muttered contemptuously, sitting down in the chair he had quitted and glowering at the girl.

As Ella began to get warm her muscles twitched so nervously she could not control herself.

"What's the matter with you, Ella?" Burrill asked testily. "I never seen you carry on so over a little cold before."

The girl lifted her wide black eyes and looked at him with a pathos in their depths that he turned from.

"I don't know," she said, her teeth chattering and her shoulders twitching. "I most believe I'm sick."

"Well, quit your foolishness and tell me what you done. Did you get it?"

Without answering, the girl reached down as well as she could with her jerking hands and drew a package from her stocking.

"Is it all right?" demanded the man, taking it from her.

"Yes, the money is, but the men—"

"—— the men!" muttered Coleman between his teeth.

"Jim says if somethin' ain't done pretty quick he's scared Simon's goin' to talk too much."

"Did you see Simon?"

"No, I didn't."

"—— your soul!" he cried, furiously. "What in the name of God did I send you down there for?"

The girl crouched lower, mutely.

"Can't you speak?" He grabbed her shoulders roughly. "Do you think I can stand such foolin'? Why didn't you mind me, hah?" He shook her frail

body violently, and slapped her on each side of her head, demanding, "Answer me, I say?"

The girl sat with hot, dry eyes, her hands lying listless in her lap. The man glared at her vindictively. At last, she said, sadly:

"Burrill, when I believed you loved me I was willin' to do anything, to risk anything, to do what you wanted; but it's all changed now." A hard, dry sob shook her frail form. "You ain't loved me since Christmas—since the night of Lissy's wedding." Her livid lips quivered, and she looked into his temper-distorted face. "Burrill! Burrill! Is any woman come between us? Burrill, tell me, is you tired of me and wants somebody else?"

The man turned his head and stared into the fire. "If you can't do nothin' better than to sit there askin' fool questions," he said, harshly, "you jest as well go on back home. I ain't goin' to talk about nothin' else till you tell me what I want to know. Why didn't you go to see Simon?"

"Darlin', because I didn't dare; they was watchin' me." The miserable girl moved closer, and laid her hand carressingly on his leg. "Jim says they've found out that a bright yellow girl was helpin' them, and doin' all the writin' for 'em, and they've got a description of me. He says I've got to be mighty particular how I shows myself around there; and I come near bein' caught, too."

"How did Jim find out so much?" he asked suddenly, ignoring her intimation of danger that menaced her.

"It's Jim's business to find out things."

"Why don't Jim skip?"

"'Cause he's watched too close. I seen him first thing when I got up the hill. I crossed the river in old man Hens' skiff, like you told me, and when I got

up the hill I met Jim, and I just said, 'Howdy, Jim?' just so, without thinkin', and he just stared at me and give me the sign, 'Watched.' So I said, 'Excuse me, sir; I thought you was my cousin Jim,' and after that it took me nearly half the day to git to talk to him. While I was walkin' about town, tryin' to git to see some of the others, a sassy-lookin' white man came up to me and tried to git into a conversation. He kept after me to come and git some dinner, and I was hungry a little, so I went. He made out he was drunk, and kept writin' notes to me, and I come near givin' myself away. I 'most read the first before I thought; then I told him I couldn't read; but he kept on askin' me to write my name, so he'd recollect it, and then I laughed and made out I was tickled, and wrote it down with my left hand, just in printin'. I kept my knife in my left hand while I was eatin', 'cause I can do it mighty near as easy anyhow. Then, when there wasn't no excuse for him to keep me no longer, an' I was startin' off, he said, 'Ah, gal, you's a cute one,' an' it 'most scared me to death. He made out he was goin', but I saw him following me after that."

Coleman sat with his head bowed in his hands, buried in deep thought. Ella watched him a long time, then crawled on her knees to his side and laid her pale cheek against his shoulder.

"Burrill," she coaxed, gently, "won't you tell me now? Won't you say if there's anybody you love more than me?"

The man looked down into her unhappy, pleading face, so pale, so drawn with mental and physical pain, and without a word stooped and kissed her dry lips gently. The girl's heart bounded with joy.

"Oh, Burrill!" she cried, throwing her arms about his neck and clinging to him with all the strength that

was left. "You are so good! Just say once more you love me, darlin'—just say so once more."

The man reached his arms about her and drew her upon his knees, kissing her with the same savage strength of passion that had controlled him when he struck her such a short time before.

"Darlin'," he said, hugging her almost crushingly; "I do love you, my pretty, pretty darlin'. I love you more than you got any idea, God knows I do. They ain't no other woman in this world as sweet as you; but, honey, you don't know how nearly distracted I am. I've got so much on my mind I don't hardly know what I'm doin' half the time." He kissed her again and again, and she nestled down in his arms like a happy child. He laid his cheek to hers, and then drew away and laid his hand on her brow, watching her critically.

"Honey," he said, gently, "what makes your face so hot? You most feel like you got fever."

Ella closed her tired eyes. "I don't know what's the matter with me, Burrill, but I feel like my head will burst."

"Poor little honey-child," he said, tenderly, "she's so tired she don't know what to do."

In spite of her aching head and tired body, Ella laughed blissfully and kissed her lover's powerful neck and strong chin again and again, with the potent love that makes self-sacrifice a heavenly balm to woman, in whatever walk of life fate may lead her footsteps.

While Burrill Coleman and Ella were talking in the isolated cabin on Englehart, Dr. Allison was sleeping once again in his shabby little room at Lauren's Station. When he awoke the next morning, the first morning after he was proclaimed a free man once more, his first thought was of his mother and the joy it would be to go to her and feel the touch of her gentle

hand upon his own ; to experience again the strength of the bond of sympathy that existed between them. He longed to see her and to dispel the torturing fears that must have beset her since the news of his arrest reached her. To assure her that he was free and that he was innocent, was now his dearest wish. Perhaps it would ease his heart-ache, too, if he would confess to his mother his love for Nellie, and explain everything to her. What a balm to his wounded, sensitive soul it would be to go to this rock of safety, his mother's love, and unburden his soul. No one understood him as she did, not even his idol, his betrothed ; and no one was better prepared to advise him and to soothe his perturbed spirits.

He ate his breakfast indifferently and was anxious to set about his packing, but it seemed whenever he started back toward his room to begin the pleasant task, another darkey would come to tell him "howdy" and rejoice with him over his vindication from the terrible crime he was called to answer to. The news of the termination of the trial had been carried far and wide by the crowds who thronged to the courthouse the day before, and the negroes flocked to Lauren's to further gratify their curiosity. Those who did not know him well enough to talk to him or congratulate him themselves, were content to simply look upon him and hear whatever he had to say.

The young man was so happy over the renewal of his freedom, that during his imprisonment seemed so hopelessly lost, he had not the heart to deny the darkies the pleasure of staring at him. The crushing burden of shame and anxiety lifted from him, together with the prospect of a visit home, left him bouyant and light hearted as a school boy, and he was glad to contribute to any one's pleasure who came in his way.

It was within two hours of train time, and Allison

knew if he did not desert his crowd of admiring spectators and prepare for his journey he would not get away that day. He finally reached his room in solitude and was stooping over his satchel, with a folded shirt in his hand, when some one knocked for admittance.

"Come in," he called, proceeding with his packing. He expected to hear the same words of congratulation that he had listened to a hundred times since yesterday, and did not lift his head. It was Burrill Coleman who entered, and he stood staring at Allison in dismay.

"Good God, Doctor, you ain't goin' away!"

Allison looked up and was startled by Coleman's haggard face. The negro told his errand briefly: Ella was sick, desperately sick, and unless Dr. Allison could come to her without delay, he despaired of her life.

Dr. Allison stood for a moment and struggled with himself. Burrill Coleman watched him anxiously and recognized the conflict going on within the young physician's bosom with sinking heart.

"Doctor, for God's sake don't go!" he pleaded. "Come and see her, and cure her, Doctor, or I feel like I'll go crazy. I'd give up anything on this earth rather than her. Doctor, if you is ever loved a woman, come and do your best to save her for me."

Allison's emotions almost suffocated him. Had the man not appealed to his love, he could have denied him better. Burrill stood before him, his lips gray and his eyes sunk deep with suffering. He thought of Nellie, and wondered if he could go on living if she were dead. He stifled his disappointment, and closing the half-packed valise, pushed it under the bed with his foot. He heard Burrill's deep sigh of relief.

The day before, as soon as he left the court room, Dr. Allison sent the following message to his mother:

"I am well and happy. I will leave tomorrow to visit you."

Today he went into the office and threw himself in a chair beside the instrument. As soon as his call was answered, he opened the key and sent:

"Detained by very sick patient. Will come as soon as possible."

He closed the key, and went with Burrill Coleman to the bedside of the sick girl.

He no sooner entered the little cabin where she lay, than he saw how slender was the thread that held her to this life. Pneumonia in its worst form had gained such odds in the battle, that there was almost no hope for her recovery from the first. Her grandmother had been sent for at daybreak, and as soon as the old woman could get her shawl and bonnet, she came. Before she left home, she gained the Syrian woman's promise to stay with the baby until she could return; and when Aunt Harmony entered, Burrill hurried to Lauren's for the doctor, in whom he had such unbounded confidence. He dared not send for Dr. Allison for fear his messenger might fail to persuade the young man how urgent was his exigency, and went himself.

The girl lay with her black eyes glowing through her pallid face like dying coals. She had thrown the blankets from her shoulders and torn her dress from her burning chest in her efforts to gain her breath more freely. As Dr. Allison sat down beside her and softly drew the covers close to her chin, she recognized him and smiled confiding gratitude for his coming. She moved her head restlessly back and forth.

"Who is in here?" she asked.

"Your grandmother and two or three others, beside your husband."

When he said the last name, he saw her smile with pleasure. Again she moved her head and tossed her arms in an effort for breath.

"Doctor, I got pneumonia, ain't I?"

"Yes."

"Doctor," she began again, and faltered, "will I talk out of my head?"

"No, I guess not; you are feeling better now," he said cheerfully.

"People don't never believe what anybody says when they talks out of their head, do they?"

"Why no. No one is responsible for what she says when she is feverish."

Ella was silent for awhile, and patiently swallowed what Allison held to her lips. She turned her burning eyes upon him again as he resumed his seat, and whispered:

"Doctor, if I talk out of my head, can't you give me something to make me stop? I tell you—" she interrupted herself, "if I talk too much foolishness, you make everybody go out of the house but Burrill, won't you? Burrill will take care of me," she said, lingering over the thought. "Burrill loves me—loves me so much!"

Dr. Allison applied his art unstintingly and stayed with the sick girl night and day, only leaving her to take his meals with Durieux and Wheeler, or to throw himself on the former's bed occasionally to snatch an hour's sleep.

Old Harmony and Burrill were with her constantly, too, and did all they could, all that love could suggest, but there was little to be done.

The end was not long in coming.

CHAPTER XXIV.

As soon as news of Dr. Allison's arrest reached Mr. Barrett's ears, he hastened to the telegraph office and sent this message flashing over the wires to his brother-in-law in New Orleans:

"Don't let Nellie read newspapers. Will explain by letter."

The letter followed upon the heels of the dispatch, and Nellie, caring but little for newspapers at any time, was unconsciously guarded from them as she would have been from something rabid; and although they contained much space devoted to the murder of the two young men, and the subsequent arrest and trial of Dr. Allison, she remained in total ignorance of everything connected with the tragedy.

She was pale and subdued when she arrived at her aunt's handsome residence, and looked to the letters from her parents as the only thing to blunt the pain of homesickness. Her mother and father wrote to her daily, bright letters, that contained only news of what passed in the village or at home. These she read and re-read whenever she could steal a moment off to herself.

She was forced to mingle in vivacious society, and having several girl and young men cousins, she had very few moments, and but little, if any, solitude, for brooding over her sorrows.

Her aunt was a diplomat, such as silently move kings and sway empires. She was informed why Nellie was sent to her before the young lady arrived, and being a woman of the world, and possessed of no patience for undesirable matrimonial alliances or mar-

riage, generally, except under most favorable conditions, she mapped out her campaign adroitly and pushed her plans smoothly, unsuspected by the victim of her conspiracies.

To begin with, she asserted that Nellie should have her voice further cultivated, while in the city, by the noted professor who was instructing her own girls; then she sent the bevy, of whom Nellie was the only listless member, to regular exercises in physical culture. The evenings were taken up with parties, theaters, operas, and lectures; and the between-times were spent in luncheons, teas, calls, and shopping. So what wonder that Nellie's bright color returned and her eyes sparkled with enjoyment.

Nor was this all. Nellie's girl cousins had cousins who were not her cousins, and among these were young men, and one young man in particular; and this gentleman made love to her so persistently that every minute of Nellie's time not consumed by her aunt's devices was taken up in thwarting his ardent designs upon her affections. Had he been the only lover, she still might have had a moment here or there for her old heartache, but others, less bold and importunate, came, were baffled, and passed on.

The gay city's whirl was not congenial to Nellie. It fascinated and awed her, but often her little country-bred heart longed to fly from the glare, the splendor, the hollowness, and the restlessness of it all, and return to the truer, freer life and the love that she knew awaited her so fervently at home.

At last the prescribed limits of her exile were over, and she was at liberty to return. The carnival, with its rollicking, glittering mysticisms was over; the great crush balls had been attended, and the curtain had dropped upon Mirth and Feastings to arise upon Penitence and Prayer. The crowds that had swarmed to

the city from everywhere had dissolved like the pageants of the night, and quiet figures glided by on missions to the ever-open churches.

When the time for her return home drew near, Nellie could scarcely veil her delight. It required all her tact and acting to show her appreciation of the kindness lavished upon her, and at the same time conceal her joy at the prospect of going home, and the hope that perchance she might meet her lover soon. She begrudged the day or two longer that the return by boat would entail, and wrote, asking her father to come for her, that she might make the trip quicker by rail.

Mr. Barrett readily complied with her request. There were reasons of his own why he wished to see her alone before she reached Sigma. He met her, radiant with returned health and the joy of seeing him again, and in his soul he congratulated his wife's judgment in sending her away, and offered a fervent prayer of mingled thanksgiving and hope.

The passage by rail was rapid and unimportant, and it was not until they had left the train and taken the boat for Lilyditch landing that Mr. Barrett had the opportunity of speaking to Nellie in privacy. They made close connection with the little mail packet at Vicksburg, and Nellie went to her state-room to lay aside her hat and bathe the cinders from her face. Her father soon followed her to her room, and together they sat down in the tiny apartment.

It was a difficult task that Mr. Barrett had appointed for himself, and he scarcely knew how best to begin. Her happy face falsely reassured him to some extent, and he placed his faith in her forgetfulness, upon the rounded beauty of her rosy cheeks, and the brightness in her eyes. That his child had ever really cared for such a man as Dr. Allison, Mr. Barrett could not bring

himself to believe. At the thought that she had even considered herself in love with him Mr. Barrett's temper became irritated, and he resolved to show her fully, before any other influence could be brought to bear, how greatly she had deceived herself.

With this resolve he began, and told the girl all that had transpired during her absence, keeping back not a single detail. He spoke plainly, dwelling first upon the fact that Dr. Allison was with the two men, Vincent Minor and Sidney Carroll, at a negro wedding, just before the murder was committed. Mr. Barrett watched his daughter narrowly while he talked, and he saw her face flush crimson. She kept her eyes cast down, and twisted the cluster of little friendship rings back and forth on her finger nervously.

Mr. Barrett told, with biting sarcasm, of the three white men participating in the negro festivities, and proceeded in his account of the tragedy with unconscious cruelty. "Then," he said, "after Dr. Allison left his most worthy companions, swearing at one of them in a towering rage, he went no one knows where, as he refused to account for his actions during the hours that intervened between his leaving the negro ball and the time when the train arrived."

"What!" Nellie gasped, "he refused to tell where he was?"

"Yes; he refused most positively to say where he spent that time," Mr. Barrett went on, totally mistaking the expression of dismay in Nellie's face for one of aversion that he would have given almost anything to know was there.

"Dr. Allison must have had serious reasons, my child," he said, "for withholding this information, when he was so well aware of the consequences it would entail. Public opinion was not slow in turning against him when it became known that Allison could

not—or would not—account for his time the night of the murder; even those who had faith in his honor before, questioned the motives which prompted him to maintain his stubborn silence.”

Nellie Barrett's lips were pale and drawn, and the misery in her eyes made her father's heart sink. She covered her face with her hands and groaned.

“Nellie, my darling, my child, do not take this man's sins so terribly to heart.”

“Sins!” the girl cried, raising her head, with eyes flashing. “Father—” She broke off suddenly, and burying her face in her hands again, she moaned, “Oh, my God, if I only dared!”

Her words were so low and so filled with suffering that they were inaudible. Mr. Barrett put his arms around her and drew her face close to his.

“Come, my darling,” he pleaded tenderly, “forget this man. He merited sympathy, beyond doubt, when he was under the charge of murder, but he is a free man now and fully capable of taking care of himself. You must see, too, my dear, with gratitude, my far-sighted wisdom in withdrawing you from his influence. If you had been allowed to engage yourself to him, this affair would now necessitate your severing that relation, and I rejoice that you are spared from a duty so unpleasant. I am sincerely glad, for his sake, that Dr. Allison has been acquitted. His acquittal is honorable, but still—”

The girl's face was turned from her father's scrutiny as he spoke, and he could not read the dumb misery that was too powerful to find relief in tears. Her eyes were bright and dry, and as Mr. Barrett held her still form against his breast, he little dreamed that what he flattered himself into believing was a revulsion of feeling, that would ultimately conquer her imagined love, was in reality the terrible calm that preceded the oncoming of a storm of grief. This revulsion he gladly

thought had come, was a condition he had looked forward to with so much hope and eagerness that it is no wonder he was blinded to what he might have read in her face had he been an unbiased observer.

Nellie was stunned. As her father went on talking to her in his effort to make her realize how fortunate she was in her narrow escape from having her future linked with the suspected man, she heard his voice dimly, without understanding what his words implied. She was thinking of nothing, seeing nothing, but the man she loved in his hour of anguish; seeing him suffering, humiliated, and for her sake willing to bear the penalty, even to the sentence of a death too ignominious to be named,—all rather than that she should be doubted or her actions questioned. As she sat there with her listless head upon her father's shoulder, indistinctly hearing his well-rounded sentences as though they came to her through the vistas of a far-away dream, there was a rap upon the state-room door that brought her with cruel suddenness to a realization of her outer life. Her father went to the door and opened it.

"We will reach Lilyditch in a few minutes, sir," she heard the porter saying. "Any packages to be taken off."

Nellie arose to her feet and stood staring before her. Her father came and kissed her tenderly. "Your mother and the children will be at the landing waiting for you, dear,—won't you try to smile for their sake?"

The girl nodded assent with heavy blankness, and mechanically put her hat on and tied the thick traveling veil closely over her white face.

The boat had whistled and was putting down the stage-plank when Mr. Barrett and Nellie reached the deck, and it was but a few minutes before the children were hugging and kissing her, struggling with each other as to which would squeeze her the hardest.

CHAPTER XXV.

When Durieux saw Nellie for the first time after her long absence in New Orleans, he was struck with the change that had come upon her. He had watched her growing pale and languid before she went away, and saw how her merry care-free spirit was subdued beneath the weight of thwarted hopes put so sternly upon her, but he was not prepared for the look of intense sorrow—of despair—that now was settled in her heaven-blue eyes and maturing her fair face from all its girlish sparkle. His heart ached for her as he saw her strive to throw off the shroud that clouded her life and appear as she used to be. Her patience distressed him, and he wished that she would break into a torrent of petulance or tears, if only to release herself from the monotony of endurance.

Durieux summoned all the gaiety and light chatter he could command in an effort to rouse her to interest in what was going on about her, but he saw that the pleasure she took in his wit was so transient that it flitted almost before his words passed into nothingness. He rode with her on horseback as he had done so often in the old days, but she complained of fatigue and seemed reluctant to leave her rocking chair. Then one afternoon he brought his buggy and asked her to drive. She went for her hat listlessly and took her place by his side without interest and without opposition.

It was delightful Spring once more, with the sunshine warm and bright, and the whole world sweet with tender verdure. The plump wild violets peeped their delicate blue heads over the closely lying leaves along the bayou sides and ditch banks, and the peach

and plum trees grouped about the cabins in the fields gleamed joyously. Nellie drew a deep breath and leaned back against the cushions of the buggy with a wistful sigh. Life to her seemed all promises that were cut away as her hand was outheld to receive them.

She had not heard Dr. Allison's name mentioned since her return. Her father had not spoken of him after they left the boat, and believing that her mother's sympathies were altogether with her father and against herself, she withdrew more and more into the solitude of her confidences and asked no questions. Yet she longed to know something; to hear his name, even if but in blame.

She rode in silence until they had driven a mile or two from home, and Durieux, reluctant to jar upon her sad reflections, waited for her to speak. He was not looking at her, yet when she turned her face toward him, his attitude seemed so expressive of sympathy, her poor starving soul was drawn to him for support.

"Mr. Durieux," she said, hesitatingly, "will you talk to me?"

Jules was surprised by the plaintive, peculiar question. He looked at her and saw that her thoughts were far away from him.

"Certainly, Miss Nellie," he said simply.

She was silent again and sat pulling the fingers of her gloves as they lay in her lap. Nellie hated gloves, and never kept them upon her hands when it was possible to avoid it. To her, they were stifling—a bondage of fashion that could not be endured. She never breathed freely when her hands were in their choking confines. Durieux looked down at her hand now and thought how small and helpless they seemed in their restlessness.

She saw that Durieux was watching her and blushed painfully.

"Will you—tell me—" she began slowly, then went on abruptly, "Mr. Durieux, where is Dr. Allison?"

She looked at him hurriedly and dropped her eyes again. Durieux answered calmly:

"He is at Lauren's. He went to see his mother almost immediately after his release."

"Mr. Durieux, will you tell me one thing more?" she asked after a pause.

"Yes," he said, with his eyes straight before him. Nellie laid her hand upon his arm, and he turned and looked into her pathetic, questioning eyes.

"Mr. Durieux, do you doubt that Dr. Allison is a perfectly honorable man?"

Durieux moved uneasily beneath her gaze. He took the trembling hand she had placed upon his arm into his right hand reverently.

"Little girl," he said, "no man who has your love can be a criminal. But still—"

Nellie started violently. "Ah, how did you know—who has told you that he—that I—"

He smiled bitterly. "You told me yourself, first, and then you both told me together afterwards."

"Mr. Durieux!—"

"Stop," he said, gently. "I know what you would say, but let me explain. My eyes and ears have been keen. I have seen and heard; have listened to your tone, your voice, ever since Edward Allison first touched your hand in greeting. I have watched the telltale color in your cheek, and the flutter of your eyelids as they tried to hide your secret from his searching, magnetic glance."

Durieux' voice was low and powerful in its suppression, as he uttered the smooth French words. He never took his eyes from her downcast face, but went on speaking:

"You told me of your happiness in his presence

with every curve of your features, and the night of the tournament ball, when, according to your promise of the dance, I took you away from him, and guided you through the crowd, which was like a dream to you in your unconsciousness of its reality—your oblivion of everything else but him. Later—later, on the gallery, just outside the ball-room, I was sitting in the shadows beside a post. The moon was almost down, and the Japanese lamps had died out one by one. You and he, pausing in your promenade, stood for a moment so close that I could have touched you with my hand. He spoke to you in words that thrilled with love's eloquence; and your voice, had I heard no more, would have told that you were—”

His teeth closed tightly on his lip, and a silence fell that was broken only by hardly drawn breath. She laid her hand upon his arm again, and looked into his averted face.

“Ah, you have guessed so much; let me tell you all. Perhaps if some one will share the burden of my awful secret I will not feel so like a criminal.”

Durieux started, and stared at her white face. She was looking straight into his eyes, unseeingly, and went on hurriedly:

“You know so much, but you do not know all. You do not know that it is I who am his social murderer. You stare at me in doubt; it is so. I, by my act of folly, have deprived him of his right to hold his head up and challenge the world to search into his soul. It was I—I, do you hear?—I, who love him better than my own life—better than my mother and father—I, who have deprived him of that most valuable of earthly belongings—his good name!”

She paused for breath, and Durieux gazed at her in distress that he could not conceal. Her eyes were dilated with excitement.

"Ah, you scorn me now! I knew you would. But you will keep my secret and hate me as I deserve to be hated."

"For heaven's sake hush!" implored the man, stricken with a fear that her wild words were the forerunner of affliction that God alone can heal. He took her hand soothingly, but she snatched it away, and withdrew from him as far as the limits of the buggy-seat would allow.

"Wait," she said tensely, "wait till I tell you everything. You think my suffering has deprived me of my reason, but let me go on and tell you all."

She went on eagerly, and told him of her father's objections to her lover, and the cruel letter, binding him to a promise that he would not seek an interview with her until his consent had been gained. She told him of Allison's proud, courteous reply, and the weeks that passed without bringing her word from him or an opportunity of seeing him. Then she spoke of the visit she was preparing to make, and her determination to see him before she went away. Durieux knew the haunted cabin, and she told how she had sent Allen to Lauren's to bring Dr. Allison to the interview.

As she related the details of the night she grew calm, and Durieux sighed in relief; but as she described how she and Allison walked rapidly over the frozen roads, and how he stood near the gallery leading into her own room until she went inside and locked the door, and then went to the window and whispered "good night" through the blinds, her excitement arose again, and she concluded:

"Do you wonder, now, that remorse is almost driving me mad? Do you wonder that the self-sacrifice which prompted him to offer his own life that I might be free—that I might escape my father's hatred—makes me willing to do anything to prove to him my love and gratitude?"

Durieux sat in silence, his eyes bent upon the rug at his feet. The girl leaned forward and repeated:

"Do you not see how much I owe him—how much I am to blame—what a despicable coward I am, and how noble, how like a martyr he is?"

Durieux turned his head toward her coldly. "No, I do not see."

Nellie doubted her senses. "What!" she cried, "you do not understand what I have told you? You do not realize how much I am to blame, nor how nobly heroic he is? Did you not hear?"

Durieux smiled sardonically. "I heard you," he said, still coldly. "I heard every word you said, but I see neither great blame upon you nor panegyric due him. You made a thoughtless blunder, and he has done his duty. That is all."

She gazed as though beginning to believe in him. "Are you in earnest?"

"Perfectly," he said, in measured, icy tones.

"Tell me—what do you mean?"

"It is hard to do, but I will try." He hesitated and began: "You were unwise, to say the least, in meeting him as you did—"

"How could I help it?" she interrupted; "I wanted to see him so."

"Then," said Jules, with his characteristic shrug, "why did you not send him word to meet you at some landing to go down the river with you? You knew that you would be alone. He had a right to go where he pleased, in any way he pleased. Mr. Barrett could not deny him that."

Realizing the plausibility of the suggestion, Nellie moaned. "Ah, why did I not think!"

"You should have thought," he went on, calmly. "Not having done so, after you had placed yourself in—a—I mean, after you met him, he simply did his duty."

"His *duty*!"

Durieux was nettled. "Yes, I said 'his duty.' Where would be our vaunted Southern chivalry—the brightest jewel our country boasts—if a man shrank behind a woman to save his life or name, that it is his own privilege to protect. What man, with the instincts of manhood about him, but would have done exactly as Dr. Allison has done?"

Nellie seemed dazed. She stared at him and then, scorning his theory, she cried:

"It is nothing then for a man to face the gallows or a life of imprisonment worse than death, that a woman should not be doubted?"

Durieux's lips curved sarcastically. "The gallows had not yet been built, nor had the prison doors been opened to him. Allison had ten chances to one. He had a good character to sustain him and a good lawyer to plead his cause, while judge and prosecuting attorney were his friends. A man is seldom sentenced upon circumstantial evidence, and had this court decided against him, there was still another between him and death. There is something more—" Durieux stopped abruptly, and both were silent. He looked about him and saw that he was more than six miles from home; it was growing late. Without speaking he guided his horse's head around toward Sigma.

As the buggy turned about, Nellie was aroused and noticed where they were. It would be dark in less than an hour. She sighed heavily and relapsed into her reverie, and they had gone some distance before she spoke.

"Then you believe that it was not love that prompted him," she said wearily.

Durieux started and looked at her sharply before he gathered her meaning.

"I did not say that."

"You said he was simply doing his duty as any gentleman would have done under the circumstances."

"Yes, I said that."

The girl's eyes flashed angrily. "Then you are wrong. You are simply cruel and unjust! Mr. Durieux, I have always looked upon you as a friend, as a real, true friend, but no friend would deprive me of all faith in human nature. No friend would try to turn every sublime instinct into ridicule or prove every sentiment to be but the promptings of selfishness. You are skeptical and you would make me like yourself. No friend would do that."

Nellie was trembling with wrath. Durieux, stung by her hasty words, struggled with himself a moment and then the words shaped themselves without his volition.

"You are right."

The girl regarded him with dumb surprise. She had arrogantly accused him, unconsciously wishing him to dispute her words. He caught her eyes and looked at her with such compelling force that she could not resist his hold upon her will. He went on, slowly and evenly:

"You are right. I am not your friend, as you say; I am simply your lover."

Nellie returned his gaze wonderingly, and felt that she was in a strange dream.

The man she had always known, the laughing, joking, half cynical Durieux was gone and before her was a personage whom she had never seen before, nor dreamed existed. His dark eyes were glowing with a power and tenderness that made them beautiful. As she mutely questioned the new being before her, his firm lips relaxed into a smile as gentle as a happy child's. He leaned nearer, still holding her spellbound with his eyes and asked softly, the bitterness all gone from his voice:

"Why are you so surprised; have I really done my part so well?"

Nellie covered her face with her hands and moaned:

"Oh, my God, why does everything go wrong!" She lifted her head and looked at him almost fiercely. "*Why* did you fall in love with me?"

Jules laughed softly. "I did not fall in love with you," he said with something like a return of his usual spirits. "When a man falls, there is some chance of his catching himself, or at least of striking something and bringing suspense to a conclusion. No," he went on seriously, "I did not fall; I slipped—I glided into it, much as a man does into a bad habit. It came so gradually, so insiduously, that I did not know of my bondage until it was too strong to be broken. I can't remember when I first realized my danger," he said dreamily, as though talking to himself, "unless it was the day you wore your first long dress and combed your hair like grown up ladies. You came into the parlor where your father and I sat, and asked us how we liked your new dress. I looked at you as you turned around before us and I was startled; I saw for the first time that you were a woman. That was twenty months ago. When Allison came, I saw that you were, indeed, no longer a child. I saw that you were not only a woman, but possessed a woman's heart to give, and you gave it willingly. And I realized my loss."

Durieux ceased speaking, and the girl sat like one crushed.

"Three lives must be ruined," she moaned; "yours, as well as his and mine."

"No. Only one will suffer. Your father will some day relent, and Dr. Allison will claim his own."

Durieux had taken the lines into his right hand, and his left was lying, palm down, just above his knee.

Nellie laid her own over it with infinite tenderness, and her voice trembled:

"If there was only something that could be done—if I could only have saved you this—" she paused. Durieux' hand lay passive beneath her own, although her fingers closed tightly around it. A chill of repulsion swept over the girl, and her hand dropped back into her lap. Durieux parted his lightly-closed teeth, and his hand trembled as he took the reins back into it. He looked at Nellie and saw that she was wounded, and he inwardly muttered an invective, that was partly a cry of self-disgust, partly a prayer for strength.

Nellie looked at him earnestly, and he saw her lips twitch with pain.

"Mr. Durieux, I wish you could understand me—I wish I could make you know how much you are to me. I would give anything if you did not love me as you do, because I am afraid we will now be estranged. I have never thought of you as I have of h—I mean in the way you wish, because I have loved you in such a different way—oh, I wish I could explain," she faltered, "but I can not think of just how to express what I feel. You know I can't do without you any more than I could without father and mother. You have always been so kind to me," she added, desperately serious, "and seemed to understand me better than any one else—even better than they. I have always looked upon you as I do upon Carrie and Ruth, only I would tell you what I would not trust to them, because you are so much wiser, so much stronger than they. You can't understand me?" She laughed a little, nervously, and her face colored. "I am afraid the truth, is I have always forgotten that there was any difference between us except that of age. I have always felt that you were just a good, dear, stronger sort of a woman—one that I could trust with anything, because

there were no little jealousies or frivolities about her. Please understand," she pleaded.

Durieux threw back his head and laughed noisily. He was irritated far more than he was amused. He laughed again, and his old sarcasm returned, with even greater force.

"So! You don't want me to be a 'brother' to you, as some girls ask their rejected lovers to be. You want me to be a 'sister' instead. Well, that's novel, certainly!"

Nellie's eyes filled with tears, but tears of vexation. He had returned to his old familiar way of tormenting her, and it pleased her because it seemed so natural, yet she was angry with herself for showing her heart to him, only to be laughed at in return.

Durieux, so accustomed to studying her translucent face, saw that he had carried his point. He had succeeded in making her angry, and that at least would prevent her grieving about his wounded heart.

When he helped her out of the buggy and opened the door for her, she paused and said sarcastically, goaded by humiliation and anger:

"Thank you, Mr. Durieux, for a pleasant ride."

Durieux laughed musically. "Ah, thanks; it is I, though, who am indebted to you. It is not every day that a man has a chance to tell a pretty girl how dearly he loves her, and," he laughed, "be accepted as a 'sister'."

Nellie's eyes flashed, and she darted away from him. Before she passed through the door, he caught her hand and compelled her to wait.

"There was one thing I said in the buggy," he said, pressing her hand tenderly, "that was not true."

There were thrilling cadences in his voice that the girl had never suspected could exist.

"I said there that I was not your friend, but simply

your lover." He paused, and when he went on there was a deeper solemnity than ever, and his tones vibrated in a minor chord that made Nellie's heart stand still. "I have said many things to you, little girl,—much that I never meant you to believe; enough to make you doubt me altogether, and think me what you once called me, a 'long-linked, hollow joke.' Let us begin all over again. I beg you to forget everything that has ever passed between us, and believe only this: Jules Durieux is an honest man and desires your happiness above all other things. I will prove it."

He dropped her hand, and passing quickly down the walk, was soon gone in the twilight.

CHAPTER XXVI.

When Jules Durieux left Nellie Barrett at the door of her home, a new weight of woe was added to her already overburdened heart. It was his purpose to seek an interview with Mr. Barrett next day and endeavor to make him look with more favor upon Dr. Allison and his love for the girl. But with the coming of the new day came reports of another tragedy that had been enacted in the parish, and one, too, that drove all other matters from the minds of men for days.

Alvah Northcot had been brutally murdered. Alvah Northcot, the same handsome cavalier who crowned Nellie Barrett Queen of Love and Beauty at the tournament, had been shot down by a gang of armed negroes, banded together secretly for the purpose of promoting negro supremacy throughout the neighborhood.

When this news swept across the parish men were set wild with consternation. That such a secret organization existed was as great a shock to the inhabitants of Asola and vicinity as was the untimely death of the murdered man. That an undercurrent of insubordination surged beneath the placid surface of mutual harmony, seemed almost preposterous to the people who lived in the midst of it all.

Young Northcot had to earn his living, and it was his circumstances, and not choice, that made the only situation with a good salary open to him, that upon Pelican plantation, as assistant manager for Major Appler. This Major Appler was a native of Wisconsin, so he said, who came to Louisiana eight or ten years previous to the time when the incident of this

narrative occurred, and opened a little store on Pelican—a large tract of land belonging to a bank of New Orleans. He was a close business man, and soon he owned not only the store, but the entire plantation; and his interests were so multiplied that he hired a man as assistant, besides young Felix, his son, who joined him soon after he entered mercantile affairs. Major Appler had never seen a plantation nigger until he reached the Southern states, and knew as little of his nature and peculiarities as the average Lousianian knows of a Hottentot or a Javanese. The Africo-American was to the Major a human entity—the means, much as was a mule, of acquiring wealth; and he drew his conclusions accordingly. He was necessarily interested in the new specimen of genus homo, and could but be amused by the wit and good humor he displayed. He had some ideas, too, *not* gathered from experience, which he brought with him when he came.

Major Appler was possessed of a most agreeable deportment, that won him a cordial welcome when he arrived; and a few hints dropped accidentally, as it were, about the company of wealthy capitalists who had sent him in advance to select a section of the South suitable for building up oil mills, cotton factories, and lumber institutions, caused him to be looked upon as a God send to the state, calculated to develop its natural resources to an extent undreamed of before; and Major Appler was dined and courted in a manner worthy of the magnate he was supposed to be.

For many years Pelican was owned by the bank, and was rented out to darkies upon shares—the bank sending an agent only during the cotton season to collect rents and make new contracts, and, as may be imagined, the negroes ran the place pretty much according to their own ideas. Scarcely a season passed

without some serious cutting or shooting affray, due to plantation anarchy and bad whisky. So when the handsome, smooth-tongued Major came, the harrassed neighbors and parish officials looked to him gratefully for a stirring change for the better under his rule; but to their sorrow, it must be said, no such improvement ever manifested itself. Things went on much as they had before, for the Northerner simply knew nothing on earth about handling that necessary evil of Southern industry—the nigger.

No doubt he tried to be master of his own property, but at all events he failed, for between petting them, much as he did his dogs when they amused him, and standing in secret awe of them when the question of holding the mighty dollar arose, the negroes knew which really held the upper hand.

Alvah Northcot, who was a thorough going Southerner, possessed of all of a Southerner's innate instincts of caste and appreciation of the eternal fitness of things, found his position at Pelican a constant source of mortification. Often he had to put every check upon his pride and irritability that self control could suggest. On several occasions he proffered resignation of his situation, but Major Appler would hear to nothing of the kind.

Northcot, honest, intelligent and energetic, would have been a hard man to replace, and his employer thrust such monetary inducements upon him that in each instance he had reluctantly reconsidered, and decided that the salary was worth holding one's temper for.

For some time before his death, Northcot was suspicious that some one was nightly riding his beautiful little mare, the one that had gained him first honors at the tournament, and he determined to watch and convince himself beyond a doubt as to whether his appre-

hensions were grounded. What at last forced him into this resolve was her condition one morning when he went to her stable early to see, as was his habit, that she was properly cared for and fed. This animal was the one dumb pet he had, and his affection for her was almost as tender as if she were human. When he examined her, he noticed that she seemed stiff and jaded, as he had often found her of late; and when led from her stall, she limped so badly that he was compelled to use another horse for his day's riding over the fields. Northcot said nothing of his discovery or suspicions where it would be likely to reach the ears of any of the tenants of the place, and quietly bided his time until night.

At ten o'clock, when the lights in the store and house were extinguished and every one supposed to be in bed, he concealed himself in a china tree that commanded a full view of the stables, and waited. Nor did he have long to wait before he saw a negro unlock the door with a key he brought with him and go into the building. When he emerged a few minutes later, he led Pet, saddled and still limping, through the door. The stars were bright, and Northcot watched the man inspect her closely. When the negro saw that she still limped too badly to be used, he jerked her bridle savagely and with a diabolical oath kicked her satiny side so hard that the sensitive animal, accustomed only to Northcot's gentle hand upon her bit, fell back helpless, quivering with fright. The sight of the negro's inhumanity made the young man's blood boil furiously. Like a demon he leaped from his concealment, and drawing his pistol, struck the negro over his head with all the strength he possessed.

The negro, taken by surprise, bounded back, cursing in foulest language, and Northcot, thoroughly enraged, followed up his advantage, beating him unmercifully.

When Northcot's wrath was appeased, he allowed his adversary to arise, and the negro slunk away muttering imprecations of vengeance.

Northcot stroked the still excited mare until she was calmed and returned her to her stall, locking the door and putting the negro's key into his own pocket.

The next day, when Major Appler was told of the encounter, to Northcot's further vexation, he expressed deepest regret, and this developed into annoyance when he found that the negro whom Northcot had chastised was one of his most lucrative tenants besides being one of his greatest favorites. He spoke roughly to Northcot of the part he had taken in punishing the darkey and warned him menacingly never to allow his personal feelings to get the better of his discretion in such a manner again.

The young man was still smarting with the negro's impudence and the effect of his own anger, and retorted hotly.

"Major Appler," he said indignantly, "you may consider my resignation to my position on this place as constantly tendered, subject to your acceptance; but in the meanwhile, as long as I am here I insist upon being treated with justice and respect by every darkey on this place. I have endured more impudence from negroes since I have been in your employ than I have in all the rest of my life put together, and if you were a gentleman, you would know how hard such insolence is to endure."

With these words he left the room.

A week went by and everything on the plantation seemed to be moving smoothly. All of the darkies who had occasion to speak to Northcot or work under his supervision showed him the same or greater respect than before; the man whom he had whipped greeted him with sullen politeness that he recognized was

forced, yet showing that the negro recognized in him his superior.

Northcot's widowed sister lived in Asola, and it was his habit to spend every Sunday with her and her children in their happy little home. He had almost forgotten his trouble with the negro during the week that intervened, and lingered at his sister's until nearly eleven o'clock on the Sunday night following his encounter, enjoying the evening unusually well in conversation with his sister and some young ladies who were making her a visit. When admonished by his sister that bed time had arrived, he reluctantly took his departure and rode across the principal street of Asola on his way back to Pelican. He had gone but a little way when Felix, who was just leaving town also, rode up to him and together they turned into the bayou road and cantered toward the plantation.

"Papa has been gone some time," the boy said, in response to Alvah's query. "He was not feeling very well, and said he would go on and go to bed. As it was so early, I thought I would wait and ride along with you; but I was beginning to believe you were going to stay all night."

Alvah rather liked this half-grown boy. There was a certain manliness linked with his still childish mannerisms that made him generally popular, despite the fact that he was a relative of the now unpopular Major, and they rode along, talking idly upon commonplace subjects, as people constantly in each other's society are apt to do when going over a road, as they were now, so familiar that either could have traversed it blindfolded.

It was a dreamy, star-lit night, soft and warm as swansdown. There was enough light to make objects along the way dimly visible, showing the bare fields to the left, wide and dusky, and the Pecan Bayou on the

right, a mysterious line of darkness and light. The stream was wide and deep enough from the recent rains to merit the name of river and bear a good-sized steamboat upon its bosom, but it was so filled with willows, sycamores, and oaks, that only in places did the water gleam beneath the stars or reveal the opposite shore. The trees and their accompanying undergrowth of shrubs and vines rioted up to the banks in tropical luxuriance to the edge of the wheel-tracks here and there, and made a gloomy fringe of shadow along the wayside the entire distance.

The two boys, as they might be called—for Felix was only sixteen and Alvah had not yet much passed his twenty-fourth birthday,—had entered upon the last mile of their way, and had passed the division line of Pelican. As they drew beneath the shadows of an unusually thick clump of saplings, Pet shied violently. Her rider spoke to her soothingly, trying to calm her fears, but the words were scarcely uttered when the report of a gun rang out sharply upon the night air, and Alvah Northcot fell to the ground with a bullet in his brain.

Only one shot was fired, but men armed with guns bounded into the road, and Felix, seized with a panic of terror, striking his spurs into his horse's side, dashed across the open fields to the woods like a madman.

Major Appler was fond of his morning nap, and was seldom ready to leave his room until breakfast was put upon the table. He slept even later than usual the morning after the midnight assault on the roadside, and when he at last went into the dining-room he was surprised to find neither his son nor Northcot ready to join him at the meal. Neither of the young men were in the house, and as he was inquiring where they were some one said that Northcot's horse was found at day-

light near the gate, waiting for admittance, with saddle and bridle on.

In the mean time several negroes, going or coming, passed the form of a man lying on the roadside; but, negro-like, for fear of being suspected or implicated in a murder, they hurried away, speaking to no one of what they had seen or apprehended, and it was not until a white man chanced that way that knowledge of the assassination reached the people of Asola. In less than an hour after the news was brought the town was in a fever of indignation. Vengeance seemed to cry out from the very soil which the young man's foot had pressed from his infancy.

No one knew or guessed who could have committed the hideous deed, until Major Appler discovered that his son had disappeared. He was really fond of the boy, and, believing that he had been foully dealt with, he set up a wild lamentation and revealed facts which almost cost him his own life.

He related an account of the difficulty between Alvah Northcot and the negro to the crowd of excited men assembled at the coroner's inquest, which they listened to in grim indignation. He told his listeners how much he regretted young Northcot's hasty measures with the negro, and that he was apprehensive from the first that the result would be disastrous. And then he told all that he knew concerning the murder of the night. He was on his way home from Asola, he said; when he reached the place where Northcot's body was found his horse shied, calling his attention to a posse of armed negroes, some fifteen or twenty in number, concealed in the bushes. He demanded to know what they wanted, and discovered that they were all tenants of Pelican. They told him they were waiting for Northcot, and that they were there for the purpose of killing him as soon as he came in sight. The men

told him, further, they had organized a secret society for the purpose of establishing negro supremacy throughout the State. They knew he was their friend, they said, and he should have their protection; but that they were resolved to wipe out every white man, henceforth, who did not treat them with the same consideration that he did.

Appler said he remonstrated with the men, and finally gained their promise to postpone vengeance upon Northcot until he could have a chance to talk to him, and then, feeling entirely assured, he went home.

"I told them," said Appler, his distress at the loss of his son blinding him to the storm of resentment that was gathering in the breasts of his listeners, "that I was sure that Alvah meant no disrespect to themselves, and that when he discovered that his horse had been abused he had acted in a moment of passion, and I urged them to delay proceedings and give me a chance to talk to him and persuade him to make suitable amendment."

The crowd who gathered around Appler listened to his story with seeming patience until he made this last assertion, and at this juncture a man named Barkers, no longer able to contain his wrath, evidenced the prevailing sentiment by springing upon him like a beast of prey.

"Merciful God!" cried Barker, clutching the Northerner's throat. "Do you dare tell us that you spoke to niggers about a white man's apologizing for protecting his individual property from depredations?"

An ominous murmur arose from the assemblage, that Cap Barringer was quick to see and suppress. He separated Barker from Appler, and the latter was allowed to regain his breath. For the first time the old man seemed to realize the position he was in. He looked from one to the other of the excited men sur-

rounding him, and began pleading for indulgence with every argument he could bring to bear in his favor.

Barker broke away from the men who were detaining him, and turned to the crowd.

"Do you restrain me from strangling that viper!" he protested passionately. "Is it not his accursed fault that Alvah Northcot is lying here before you, shot from ambush, in the night? Can you blame a nigger for anything he may do, when he has such a hell-fiend for a master as that reprobate there before you? Who is Alvah Northcot's murderer—who, I ask you, if not the man who, knowing of his danger, slunk off to bed like a hound and left an innocent man to go blindly into a trap that awaited him? If Major Appler was not in sympathy with the negroes he has so materially aided in demoralizing, why did he not hurry back to Asola and gather men to save Northcot's life? Even if he did not want negro supremacy defeated, why did he not at least warn Northcot of the danger he was in? Who is Northcot's murderer?"

Major Appler quailed beneath the wrathful eyes bent upon him. He made one more protest with his white lips.

"How could I, gentlemen—how could I have returned to Asola, with twenty shot-guns pointed at me?"

"Was the bayou road the only way to reach Asola?" demanded Barker relentlessly. "Is not the road through the fields near the railroad even three miles shorter?"

"Gentlemen, I beseech you to hear me," Appler pleaded. "Surely none of you can believe that I did not have faith in the promise I had won from the men. Had I for a moment doubted them, I would have made an effort to warn Alvah. My own child was with him, and you must surely believe that I would

not have left him to a fate so terrible had I suspected that it awaited him. Where is Felix?" he cried, wringing his hands. "Is no one going to help me find my poor boy's body?"

Public sentiment swayed slightly in sympathy with the bereaved father, and Captain Barringer, quick to take advantage of it, caught Appler by the arm and whispered:

"They are going now to look for Felix. The train goes through in an hour. You had better hurry. I can't promise to protect you. You see what you have done; you see how they feel."

Appler groaned. "Captain, I can't leave my boy—"

Barringer shrugged his shoulders. "Leave the boy to me. Everybody likes Felix."

Before Appler was allowed to go the sheriff compelled him to make a list of the negroes who constituted the gang assembled for the purpose of killing Northcot, and as the greater part of the crowd dispersed to seek the missing boy, Appler followed Cap. Barringer's advice, and escaped the people's vengeance while he could.

It was not long before Felix was found. Barker detected hoof-prints from the road leading across the freshly plowed fields, and following these into the woods, the boy was found hiding among the trees, still frightened almost out of his senses. He was unhurt, except for a few scratches he had given himself in his flight through the woods.

CHAPTER XXVII.

By sun down nearly all of the men who had been searching for the negroes implicated in Northcot's murder had returned to Asola or their homes in the adjacent villages or plantations, and eight or ten negroes had been captured during the day and landed in jail; but still the ring-leaders, the organizers, of the society or clique had not been found, and the sheriff, his deputies, Barker and several other men as determined as the latter upon checking anarchy were still out, nor did they return until it grew so dark in the woods that a negro could not have been seen if he had been come upon.

Throughout the day a portentous muttering echoed from mouth to mouth among the thoroughly incensed citizens, that made Captain Barringer shudder. As soon as he returned to Asola, worn as he was with hunger and fatigue, he went immediately to the stout brick jail to see that it was secure.

The jailor, an immense black negro, strong enough to throttle an ox, who had served in that capacity for years, was on duty and went with Captain Barringer upon his rounds of inspection.

The negroes arrested and brought in during the day were quiet, but they were terribly frightened. They too, had heard.

Captain Barringer saw the jailor lock and bar the place properly, and taking the keys from his hand, he carried them home with him.

Mrs. Barringer's anxiety during the day had been so great that she was almost prostrated with nervousness, and when at last her husband returned, the delight of

seeing him again at home and unharmed very nearly caused her to give way to the hysterics that had threatened her all day. She was a frail looking little woman, really stronger than her appearance indicated, with a capacity for loving her portly, genial husband far more in keeping with his size than her own.

She had a tempting supper awaiting the tired sheriff and he lost no time in disposing of it. In seeking the rest he desired so keenly, Captain Barringer could not sleep, as much as he longed to do so. He tried to lie quietly, for every time he moved, however cautiously, he could see a pair of wide blue eyes as far from slumber as were his own. At last, though, he dozed and was drifting into blissful oblivion when the bell on his front door pealed violently and he started up to find the blue eyes bending above him, not having yet been closed.

"The keys—oh, darling, they've come for the keys; what shall we do—what shall we do!" As Mrs. Barringer spoke she jumped out of bed and catching up the keys from where they lay on the mantel-piece, she clutched them to her bosom in desperate resolution.

Barringer kissed his wife tenderly and begged her to be calm. The bell rang again as he hurried into his clothes, and as the third sharp peal echoed through the house, he opened the front door and stepped upon the gallery. As Captain Barringer confronted the group of determined men standing about the steps, Mr. Barker stepped nearer and spoke:

"Captain, I have to trouble you for the jail keys, if you please."

"Mr. Barker, you know that you are asking more of me than it is in my power to grant," Barringer said, firmly.

"Now, look here, Barringer, it ain't any use for you to talk like this," said Barker, coaxingly. "We were

afraid you would want to act this way. Where are the keys?"

"They are in my room."

"Then we must get them."

"Gentlemen," began the sheriff, closing the door behind him and moving further out among them, "this is a case of about thirty to one, and I know as well as you do that resistance on my part will be unavailing; but I tell you plainly that to pass through that door you must step over my prostrate body, and when you have done that you will still have to lay violent hands upon a defenseless woman before the keys are reached. I have already said all that I can to turn you from this course. I have pleaded, I have reasoned,—I have used every argument in my power to dissuade you from committing this crime. You protest," he interposed, listening to the murmur that surged through the crowd, "but it is a crime, and one that each of you must answer for in a hereafter. You are right when you say that Alvah Northcot's murder must be avenged. It must—and it shall be; but let the law—that law by which we white men should be the first to abide—take its course. I beg you once more to go quietly to your homes, and do nothing in this case, further than help me find the ring-leaders of the gang still at large. I do not want to shed any man's blood—you see I am entirely unarmed,—but you can not get the keys as long as I am alive."

There was a growl of rebellious protest in the crowd, followed by Barker's irritable assertion:

"You know well enough, Barringer, that there's not a man among us who would be willing to hurt you or annoy your wife. What you say about the law and the nigger is all well enough when it is handled as a theory, but when it comes to the nigger himself it's another thing. You may as well expect to control a child

by law. No, sir; we know what it is our duty to do, and we are here to do it. We are here not so much to avenge poor Northcot's assassination as we are to teach the niggers a lesson about nigger rule that they won't be likely to forget as long as this generation lives. As long as they are fools enough to be influenced by such dollar-worshipping scoundrels as Appler, they must bear the consequences. The sooner they learn that nigger supremacy can never be obtained until the last drop of white man's blood is spilled, the better it will be for them. Come now, Captain," he added, again using persuasion, "give us the keys. We don't want to hurt you, and we don't want to damage the jail and put the parish to the expense of repairs."

"As to that, Mr. Barker, I have nothing to say. If the jail is not strong enough to hold the parish prisoners in and keep a mob out, it is our misfortune. I realize that I am unable to stay your hand if you are bent upon destruction of life and property. Two-thirds of the men of Asola and neighborhood are here among you, and there are not enough men left to assist me in resisting you, even had I time here at midnight to assemble them for the purpose." Captain Barringer turned once more to the mob and pleaded as he had earlier in the day: "For God's sake, be temperate,—leave the punishment of these men to the hand of the law!"

"Hand of the law be ——!" exclaimed Barker, thoroughly aroused by what he considered the sheriff's pig-headed stubbornness. "Captain Barringer, I ask you once more to give us the keys."

"Mr. Barker, I have told you upon what conditions only you can get the keys."

Barker wheeled around and with a muttered imprecation, which was echoed upon every side, walked out of the yard, followed by the men, who were one with him in sentiment.

The crowd surged through the gate after him, and without question proceeded in a body, to their favorite resort. Many of them had been there too often already since dusk.

It was twelve o'clock when the crowd filed into the saloon, and the sleepy bar-keeper sprang up with interest.

"What news, boys?" he asked, eagerly.

Some one told him of the interview with Captain Barringer, as he put whiskey and glasses upon the counter. Whiskey and words flowed freely, and one after another of the men turned to Barker for his opinion.

Barker had been saying little. After taking one drink, he refused to swallow another. He stood leaning against the counter, listening to the hot-headed threats that rapidly chased each other through the conversation. Some one addressed him.

"Eh, Barker," the voice said, mockingly. "As Barringer says, better leave these devils to the hand of the law, eh?"

Barker, never for a moment having relinquished his design, fired at the words and declaimed:

"Gentlemen, I ask you what is the hand of the law? What is it but a piece of clumsy machinery, pulled by politics on one side and money on the other? What has the so-called hand of the law done in the cases of robbery and murder that have made our parish and the counties across the river flow with blood in the past eight months? What has the law done to the robbers who would have murdered old man Chaffin? What, I demand, has that mighty power done to avenge the assassination of Sidney Carroll and Vincent Minor? And now that we have caught the devils red-handed in their crimes, we must turn the matter over to the mighty strength of the all-just law! What does a

nigger care for law in any of its forms? What respect has he for any ethics that he cannot see wreaking immediate punishment upon a transgressor? Most of you have heard of the hanging of Lige Bowen, for the murder of his wife, at Hudson's Landing some ten years ago. I was there. When Bowen ripped his wife's heart out, and was confronted by her brothers and the friends who watched her and her child together die a lingering death of agony, he fled from the just vengeance of his own race and threw himself upon the mercy of the law. I saw him the day he was hidden in jail from the niggers, who would have killed him like the reptile that he was, and I never saw more abject terror on a human face. I thought he would die of fright. His bright yellow skin looked green in its pallor, and the blood that should have been in his lips had gone to his eyes in clotted veins.

"The law extended its hand and shielded him from being cut to shreds by his wife's brothers. The sheriff compassionately locked him in jail to await his trial, and in the peaceful seclusion of the Oakport jail his 'reformation' began. His preacher and religious friends crowded to see him. He was prayed for and wept over. In the year of indolence he had, Christ's promises to the repentant sinner were chanted so continuously in his ears that by the time the hour came for paying the penalty of his deed, he had so far recovered from fear and regret of his crime, if he ever felt any, that he looked upon himself as a martyr—a second Daniel.

"I saw him the morning he was hanged, and, by George, he had worked himself into such a state of religious exaltation at the thought of stepping immediately into the presence of his God—whom he swore had come in person to visit him the night before—that he could scarcely wait for the appointed moment to come. Yes, sir; he went to that gallows with as firm

a step and as proud a bearing as ever a king went to his coronation, and there was a look in his face that showed the ecstasy he was in. The hundreds of niggers crowded around the jail steps, as he came out, all saw that look as well as I, and I venture to say there was not a religious fanatic there but who would gladly have exchanged places with him if he would have suffered it. He paused at the head of the steps and swept his eyes across the multitude before him, and in a voice that rang like a clarion to the farthest limits of the crowd, he shouted: 'Good-bye, children of God; follow me!' Follow him!—and I'll be — if they haven't been doing it ever since!"

Barker paused for breath and then went on with flashing eyes:

"Gentlemen, there isn't a man among you but knows a nigger as he knows an open book—knows his total depravity and knows his few good points. You know that he is a creature of emotions and superstition. His chief delight, next to gambling, is in working himself into a state of religious frenzy. He is a consummate coward and can resist stealing no better than a cat can. He can give a Turk a fair start and then beat him lying and cheating. What Captain Barringer and Mr. Barrett said today about amending the laws to fit the exigency of such cases is of course a capital idea and one that should be acted upon without delay; but gentlemen, we are not here for the purpose of legislating tonight nor here to discuss the negroes' past nor his future. We are here to give the niggers such an object lesson in negro insurrection as will not be forgotten in many a day."

A shout of assent interrupted the speaker's rapidly flowing words, and when it subsided Barker went on, his firm voice ringing with contagious patriotism:

"Has it come to that point where a white man dare

not try to defend his personal property? Has it come to the pass where a man dare not venture along a public road at night without a bullet proof armor for himself and beast? Can't a man keep an honest store on his place without a regiment of police to protect him from being robbed and assassinated as soon as it is dark? Gentlemen, have we not met with enough outrages within the last few months to make a man either a driveling coward or else desperate enough to wipe out the pestilence at any cost? What is to become of ourselves, of our homes, if we yield in this—we, a handful of white men amid thousands of half savage negroes?"

Barker paused once more and when he spoke again excitement had left his manner, and his words came with a calmness and clearness that suggested polished steel.

"Gentlemen, I ask you one last question. Answer it to suit yourselves. Who is there here, in this crowd, willing to go with me and give these fiends the punishment they deserve?"

There was not a dissenting voice or gesture, not one. Next morning three ghastly forms hung from the upper rear gallery of the court-house and vengeance was begun.

All day long men searched the plantations and woods adjoining Pelican for the leaders of the organization, but with no success. Blood-hounds were telegraphed for and set upon the track of the fugitives, but when night came nothing had been achieved, yet the baffled mob was as determined as ever.

The miserable wretches in jail looked upon the last gleam of the setting sun, shooting its parting rays through the grating of the door, with terror that amounted to despair.

The lamps were lighted and the unhappy victims of misguided ambition huddled together in the cage, lis-

tening for any foot-fall upon the stair that might herald their doom. With each gliding moment, their misery became more acute. The jailor was with them trying to cheer them with his presence, while inwardly he quaked and started covertly at every sound. He had been ordered by Captain Barringer to remain with the prisoners all night and he was trying to do his duty, but the temptation to fly from the scene he dreaded was almost more than he could withstand. He had almost made up his mind to go to the sheriff and give up his office as jailor or be released from spending the night at his post, when his delayed plans were shattered by the sound of advancing foot-steps.

The outer door that had been broken down by the mob the previous night still lay in ruins, and the party of men now approaching entered without opposition,

As the men entered, the jailor crouched behind a cell door and the prisoners, one and all, groveled upon their knees, screaming for mercy. The attitude of the wretched creatures, so pathetic and yet so nearly grotesque, together with the ignominious flight of their giant protector, seemed to strike all of the white men at once in the same light, and a burst of laughter vibrated against the stilled walls.

"Get up from there, you miserable fool!" said one of the men, shoving the nearest prostrate negro with his foot. "Get up, I say. What mercy do you deserve? What mercy did you show to Alvah Northcot when you stood by and saw him shot. Get up. We are here to keep you from getting your just deserts from the hands of the lynchers and not to send you to the devil where you belong."

The speaker was Jules Durieux.

When Captain Barringer wrote Mr. Barrett asking him to send what men he could to help him guard the prisoners from the mob until danger was past, Jules,

talking to Mr. Barrett at the time that the note was received, instantly volunteered his services, and he and two others from Sigma rode out to Asola together, while Mr. Barrett went with the crowd to further search the woods along the river.

There were ten or twelve men who went to the jail, and these sat there passing the time as best they could until daylight. For two nights Jules stayed and then, the hunted negroes still being at large, he went back to his work and some one else took his place. He was tired out when he reached Englehart after his second watch at the jail and was eager to get to bed and to sleep, but Wheeler was anxious to hear the news and stopped him to talk.

"By the way, Jules, what do you suppose Martha Coleman is buying so much extra provisions for, the last few days?"

"Why, I don't know," laughed Jules, "unless she is killing the fatted calf for the prodigal. Burrill's gone back to her since Ella Green died. The darkies tell it on Burrill that he is afraid to stay in his house alone since the girl died there, and has returned to Martha for protection."

Wheeler laughed. "What struck me as being singular was that she paid cash for what she got."

"Oh, well," yawned Jules, "I suppose Burrill's been lucky at craps again. What did she get?"

"Well, salmon, sardines, dried apples, canned peaches, crackers, and such things; besides flour and ham. She got so much of each was what made me curious about it."

Jules made some trivial remark, and hurried off to bed, where he slept in blessed oblivion of his sore heart, of Edward Allison, the negro uprising, lynchers, and every other earthly thing, for two hours.

When Louis came to awaken Durieux for dinner, he

told him that a certain one of the tenants had been waiting for some time, and seemed very anxious to talk to him, but that Mr. Wheeler would not allow him to be awakened.

"All right, Louis," said Durieux, throwing cool water over his sleepy face. "Tell him I'll be out directly."

"Mr. Juro," a voice without called tentatively, "I'd rather come in there, sir, ef you don't mind."

"All right, Jake," said Durieux, recognizing the voice. He went to the mirror and commenced brushing his hair. The darkey entered, and shut the door carefully behind him. It is so altogether out of a negro's line of conduct to close a door, that Durieux noticed the act instantly, and moved his head slightly, so that he could see the negro's reflection in the glass before him, and there he carefully studied the man's troubled features as he stood behind him, unconscious of the scrutiny he was subjected to.

Jules put on his collar and waited for the man to speak, watching him in the glass as he buttoned it. Turning around abruptly, he demanded:

"Well?"

The negro jumped as if he had been shot, and a look of fear masked his face. Durieux tied his cravat and said naturally:

"Well, Jake, what can I do for you?"

The darkey showed so much relief that Jules almost laughed aloud.

"Mr. Juro," began Jake, choosing the darkey's usual form of asking a delicate question, "dey ain't offerin' no reward for de capture of Mr. Northcot's murderers, is dey?"

"Yes."

The darkey shifted uneasily.

"Mr. Juro, if a man knowed dem niggers ought to

be hung for dey meanness, an' was to tell where dey was at, would dey pay him de money 'thout lettin' any of de colored people know who 'twas give 'em away?"

"They 'pintedly' would," Durieux declared emphatically. Then he adroitly added: "Jake, if you happen to know of anybody who has an idea where these rascals are, you tell them I answer for it, if they will give us the desired information, the money shall be paid over to the man who earns it, and nobody, white or black, shall know who gets the reward. You understand?"

Jake drew near the chair where Durieux had thrown himself, and leaning over, he whispered cautiously:

"I knows where dem niggers is at. Dey's at Marthy Coleman's. One of 'em is her brother on her pa's side; an' dey's fixin' to cross de river tonight in a skiff."

"Is it possible! Those niggers concealed on Englehart! Jake, you must carry a letter to Mr. Barrett as soon as I write it. You need not be afraid," he added as he saw the perplexity in the man's face. "You are simply to take a sealed letter to Mr. Barrett, and you will not be supposed to know what's in it. Be sure that the note is put into his hand, and then your work will be done. You can go anywhere you like then."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Durieux and Wheeler sat upon their horses in the shadow of the trees, waiting impatiently. It was growing late, and Mr. Barrett had not yet arrived. They did not think it probable that the negroes would attempt to go out to the river as long as there was a chance that white people might be encountered on the road. The moon, now three days old, was bright enough to light the open fields too well for egress by that way to the river, and a skiff could not pass across the river without possible detection.

At last Durieux descried a body of horsemen advancing, and Wheeler and he rode forth to meet them.

"You are late," he commented as soon as he drew near.

"Yes," Mr. Barrett returned. "Early this afternoon Mr. Barker and his men came through Sigma, saying that the negroes were reported to have gone through Willowburn, intending to cross the river near there; so we joined them and rode down the river, only to find that we were misled. I was there when Jake brought me your note. How did you discover that they were on Englehart?"

Durieux evaded the question. "The search will not be fruitless here. We are certain of finding them now, I think."

"Have they been caught?" Mr. Barrett asked eagerly, misinterpreting Durieux' confidential manner.

"No. There were only two of us, you see, so we thought best to wait. We ought to begin the search at once, however, now that you are here."

He turned and led the way, followed by the crowd,

—a party of nearly thirty,—which consisted of every type of white man in the parish. There were Mr. Barrett and his employees, and Mr. Hays, besides several others who were bitterly opposed to mob law in any of its forms, and whose chief motive in joining the hunt for the negroes was to prevent violence, if it lay in the power of man to do so without shedding a friend's blood; Mr. Barker, and men like him, who believed that malignant diseases required heroic treatment; and the type represented by Mr. Henderson, who asserted that when negroes took their own lives in their hands, they alone were responsible for the result; and, last, that class ever ready for adventure, believing that might is right, and that a man is not a man without unlimited license, primarily, and an internal capacity for whiskey that allowed as much absorption of the beverage, without flooring him, as his taste demanded. This last type, fortunately, was in the minority; yet it was there, in force sufficient to incite the more impulsive men to acts of haste that better judgment in cooler moments would condemn.

The crowd moved toward the back part of Englehart, following Durieux and Wheeler as silently as possible. When Martha Coleman's house was in sight, five or six of the men dismounted and moved on cautiously, leaving their horses to the care of the rest.

Durieux knocked on the door of the cabin, and after some delay it was opened by Martha herself. She peered into the night, and started violently when she saw the group of white men on her gallery.

Durieux, Mr. Barrett, and Barker pushed by the woman and entered the house.

"Martha, where are the men?"

"La, Mr. Durieux, what men is you talkin' about?" Martha stammered, staring at the three men with dilated eyes.

"The men you are helping to hide," said Durieux, calmly; "the men who have been here since last night; the man who left his shoes there by the chair."

The woman had partially regained her self-possession, and answered sullenly, casting a quick furtive glance at the forgotten shoes.

"They ain't no men been here."

"Where is Burrill?"

"I don't know where Burrill's at. He don't stay around me much; everybody knows that."

The woman bristled with stubborn defiance, and Barker was exasperated. Two or three other men had come into the cabin, and turning to one of these, Barker commanded:

"Bring me one of the ropes; this woman's got to be strung up to the rafters to make her remember things."

Martha watched the men bring in the rope, and falling upon her knees, she implored:

"For God's sake don't kill me! I ain't to blame for nothin'; God knows I ain't."

As Barker made a pretense of putting the rope around the woman's neck, she screamed in a mad-dened paroxysm of terror, and bounding to her feet, she would have escaped if the men near the door had not caught her. She stared about her wildly, and Durieux, fearing to frighten her too much, went up to her and spoke compassionately:

"Tell me where the men are," he said decisively, "and no one shall hurt you."

The woman trembled piteously, and clutched Durieux' arm, feeling sheltered by his sympathy. She leaned over and whispered hoarsely: "Look in de cotton house."

The men released her, and she sank into a limp heap upon the floor, sick with fear.

The mob outside, in the meanwhile, had surrounded

the house, and had hitched some of the horses to the rough walls of the little cotton-house standing a few paces back. Hays and two other men were leaning against the door of the cotton-house, when Durieux went up to him and whispered:

"She says they are in here."

"What! in here?" cried Hays, wheeling around; "I don't believe a word of it!" With that he jerked the door open and jumped into the room. The aperture was about two feet above the ground, without steps. When he and several who followed him had entered the small apartment and looked about them with the aid of a match some one lighted, they found it entirely empty.

There was a loft, and Hays sprang from the floor through the opening, using the rough logs of the wall to assist him in mounting. The moon was shining dimly through the open gable end, and Hays had hardly leaped into the loft before he found himself surrounded by the desperate, hunted negroes.

Grabbing the nearest, he drew his pistol and shouted, "They are here!"

It took but a few moments to get the negroes down from the loft, but when all but one had descended, he held back reluctantly.

"Go on," said Durieux.

"Let me git my hat," he retorted doggedly.

"Go on, I tell you. I'll bring your hat." Durieux gathered the hats that lay scattered about the floor and climbed down as he had ascended aided by the log wall. When he reached the ground, the negroes were in the midst of a group of white men and their hands were being securely bound. In the dim light Durieux had to look closely to distinguish the features before him. The first face that he gazed into made him start back in amazement.

"Burrill Coleman!" he cried. "In heaven's name, what are you doing in this?"

Coleman laughed a short, hard laugh. He returned Durieux' gaze calmly. "I'll take my hat, boss, if you please."

Jules, too confused by his surprise to further question the negro, placed the hat upon his head and moved on toward the other helpless captives. At the final success in securing the leaders of the gang, the mob was working itself into a condition bordering upon madness, and as Durieux listened to the passionate words that were hurled back and forth like red hot missiles, he shuddered and his heart grew heavier within him.

"These are the niggers!" Barker was almost screaming in his excitement. "These are the fellows we want. Buck Williams and Jeff. Our job's 'most done now, boys!"

Durieux had come to the last of the negroes and he looked about him in consternation. He realized that there were only four negroes and five hats.

The mob shouted and swore. "We've got 'em, have we? Got 'em at last! String 'em up to the first tree! 'Twon't take long to send 'em to the country where they can't form secret societies!"

The threats would not be idle. Durieux crushed the two old hats he held together and pressed both upon the last negro's head.

When the white men, headed by Hays, rushed into the cotton-house, fired with excitement and incredulity, they were entirely at the mercy of the negroes, and Hays at last, when the prisoners were secure, stopped to consider the danger he had been in. The negroes seemed unarmed, and he asked, wonderingly:

"Where are your shot-guns?"

"We lost 'em," growled Jeff.

"How was that?" demanded Barker, incredulously.

"You all set the hounds on us an' we throwed 'em into de slough an' climbed trees."

"Well I'll be doggoned! You say the blood hounds were on your trail?"

Jeff giggled. "They sho was. They had us but you all thought they didn't know they business, an' called 'em off."

Burrill Coleman was silent and alert. With closed lips he watched every movement of his captors, though not a sound escaped him. The other three talked willingly and answered the questions put to them with a coolness that made Durieux watch them in mute amazement. The mob had remounted and with the prisoners on foot, the crowd moved on, gaining the roadway leading through the fields toward the river.

Buck Williams was walking between Mr. Hays and Durieux and presently, lifting an unconcerned countenance to the latter, he asked: "Boss, is you got any tobacco? I's most dead for a good chaw. I ain't had none since Sunday."

Durieux shook his head. "No, I have none."

The darkey then turned to Hays with his request and Hays, who used it, felt in a pocket and drawing out a piece of a plug, cut off some with his knife and placed it upon the scoundrel's outstretched tongue.

The night was wearing away. One and another of the roosters in the negroes' chicken houses, dotting the fields all over the place, settled down after the midnight signal had been throated from one side of the plantation, on and on, and back again.

Now and then a cur in the distance yelped, but silence shrouded the world save for the sighing of the wind in the distant trees and the tramp of the horses' feet upon the hard road. Occasionally one of the riders spoke to another in a low tone, but the uproar of excitement was smoldering and seemingly extinct. A

negro burying ground had come in sight and voices seemed more stilled than ever. The old graves, weed grown and sunken, were overhung by a group of enormous pecans and cottonwoods from whose gaunt limbs the long grey moss swayed with a soft "swish" as though to warn the passing mob from the dismal retreats it overhung.

Barker drew his horse up violently beneath the branches of a pecan tree reaching far across the road and in his ringing deep-chested voice, he demanded:

"Where are we taking these accursed devils? What better place than this can we find for ending their abominable lives?"

A chorus of assent went up from the crowd and the tempest of excitement once more burst forth.

Like a flash Mr. Barrett spurred from his position in the rear of the procession, and wheeling his horse he faced the mob and began:

"Gentlemen, I realize the utter uselessness of my trying to turn you from your present purpose. For the last three days everything that could be said has been urged against this hasty method of punishment. To argue with you further would be but a waste of breath. I have urged everything I could to persuade you to let the men have a trial and be dealt with by the officers of the law. You all know how emphatically I disapprove of lynching. No man living more earnestly desires to stop the wholesale crimes that have afflicted us within the last year than I—no man more willingly will lend his aid toward punishing Alvah Northcot's assassins than I, nor is any one more determined to put down the negro rebellion which has so recently arisen in our midst; but, gentlemen, I am determined to take no part in so-called mob law. We are men enough, it is to be hoped, to make laws and abide by them; the laws are in the white man's hands

and it is his duty to keep them there, but it is none the less his duty to be the first to abide by these laws which his state has made. There is little difference between lynching and cold blooded murder, and I beg you, if you cannot be turned from your purpose of hanging these negroes tonight, that you will at least not murder them within the limits of my property."

The muttering of anger that arose was cut short by Mr. Hays riding up to Mr. Barrett's side. He was determined not to witness the intended crime wherever it might be committed, and he spoke decisively:

"Gentlemen, Mr. Barrett is right. Lynching is a sin before God, and I beseech you not to let your haste and excitement cause you to do that which in your calmer moments will fill you with remorse. At all events," he went on, growing angry with the hissing and epithets of derision that greeted his words, "Barrett has a right to his own plantation and may say what shall be done upon it. These men don't live here—their homes are fifteen miles from here. Their wives should at least be allowed the privilege of giving their bodies proper burial."

"Here, here," some young upstart in the crowd cried. "That won't go! Burrill Coleman does live on this place!"

"I am in hopes," said Mr. Barrett gravely, "that Burrill can satisfactorily explain his connection with this affair. Jeff Douglas, as is well known, is a connection of Coleman's wife. Isn't that so, Jeff?"

"She claims to be," the darkey replied indifferently. "A half sister or something of that kind."

Barker turned abruptly upon Burrill. "Can you explain your connection with this gang of murderers?"

Buck Williams screwed his ugly face into a grin. "I should smile," he muttered. Burrill stood silently staring at the ground, and he went on jeeringly, rais-

ing his voice. "Go ahead, Mr. Coleman. Explain to these gent'men how it comes you is seen in sich undesirable comp'ny. Speak up for youseff—I knows you kin do it—an' maybe we won't all go to heaven by the same train."

Burrill lifted his head and looked at his tormentor coldly.

Wheeler rode up to Durieux and questioned anxiously: "Jules, what can this mean? Surely—"

He broke off and listened again. Buck returned Burrill's gaze for a moment, then shifted uneasily. The two other captives laughed, and the older one taunted with malicious glee.

"Got you under his thumb yet, ain't he, Buck?"

Coleman turned upon him and whispered fiercely: "Fool! If you are goin' to hang, why don't you do it like a man?"

Barker again confronted Burrill. "Why did these men come to you as soon as they were in trouble? Ah, Burrill, I am inclined to believe that when the Mississippians sent for you, they had just cause for doing it."

"Mr. Barker," said Burrill, with his habitual politeness, "nobody can't prove that I ever done anything wrong. Ask Mr. Durieux and Mr. Wheeler. They knows I'm a hard-workin' man. I stays at home attendin' to my business year in an' year out. I owns up, I ought not to be seen in no such company; but, as Mr. Barrett says, Jeff's my wife's brother, and it ain't but natural but what I'd try to help him save his life."

While Coleman spoke the other three negroes stood looking at him with mingled surprise and admiration, and when he finished, Buck threw back his head and laughed uproariously.

"What we most want to know," cried some one of the hotheads, impatient at the delay, "is, have we got the leader of the Pelican gang?"

"Yes, yes! That's what we want to know."

The crowd surged back and forth, and Barker turned again to Coleman.

"I suppose, then," he said, "you know nothing of the society organized on Pelican for the purpose of killing out the white men?"

"No sir," he returned, stoutly, "I know nothing of it."

Jeff Douglass uttered a long, low whistle, and the other two exchanged significant glances. Buck opened his mouth to speak, but Coleman turned his glittering black eyes upon him, and he slunk back in silence. Again the crowd moved restlessly.

"Are we sure we've got the ringleader?"

"I think we have," said Barker. "Major Appler told me that Buck Williams and Jeff Douglass were the men he was talking to the night of the murder."

He turned here to Buck and put the direct question, "Are you the leader of the gang, Buck?"

"No sir," the man answered, without a moment's hesitation.

"Jeff, are you?"

"No sir."

Barker then asked the young negro, who had until then said nothing:

"Are you?"

Buck and Jeff laughed at the idea, and even Coleman smiled grimly.

"La, Mr. Barker, Si ain't got sense enough to lead a horse to water, much less lead a gang of men."

Durieux was troubled. He wondered if he had not made a mistake in concealing the fact that there was another man hidden somewhere in the cotton house. He dismounted, and handing the bridle to Wheeler, he went behind Buck, and while he ostensibly tied his hands more securely, he whispered:

"Who was the other man in the cotton house?"

Buck started. "Lord, boss, how did you know there was another one?"

"Don't you know that you have two hats on your head? I couldn't hide it any other way while they were watching me, and I didn't want any more niggers lynched than I could help."

"He ain't nobody in perticular, sir,—just a fellow like Si, who joined the gang becaze he didn't know no difference."

Durieux could not linger longer without attracting attention. He went back, and stood leaning against his horse.

The hot-heads were clamorous. "We must have the leader," they cried.

"Yes," Barker acquiesced, with equal determination, "we must have the leader, if we have to hang every nigger in north Louisiana to get him!"

Barker's words were met with a shout of applause that made the woods echo.

"Make yourselves easy, gent'men, you is got the leader."

Barker stared at Buck Williams angrily. "What do you mean?" he thundered, aggravated by the darkey's calmness. "Have you not each denied it?"

"Is you asked Burrill Coleman who is the leader?" asked Buck, stolidly.

"Burrill Coleman!" exclaimed Wheeler and Durieux in a breath. "Why, man—"

"Burrill Coleman, are you the leader?"

"No, Mr. Barker, I am not!"

"Burrill, you lie!" shouted Buck, in a fury.

Coleman turned his cold, glittering eyes upon his accuser again. "I do not lie. I am not the leader."

"Hoo!" muttered Williams; "I see. What you is and what you was is different, I reckon."

Coleman was silent. His finely proportioned figure, with every nerve on duty to support it against the terrible doom that awaited it, looked almost noble in the dusky moonlight. His intelligent countenance was calm and tranquil, though there was a look of weariness about his expressive eyes.

Buck's sneer was not lost upon the crowd. "Make Buck Williams tell what he knows," a voice said, above the murmur of interest.

Barker acted upon the suggestion. "Was Burrill Coleman leader of the Pelican rebellion?"

"Mr. Barker," Buck began, slowly. He paused, and when he spoke again there was a tremor in his voice. "I know my time is come, and they ain't no use of me to lie just before goin' to the judgment seat of God." He tried to clear his voice, and went on: "It ain't fair to give another man away, an' I wouldn't do it ef it wasn't to save some other po' fool nigger from goin' to the devil with a rope 'round his neck. We's been terribly fooled by one nigger, who come along an' 'swaded us we could boss the white men. The man what was leadin' us done so many smart things, an' kept hisself so clear of 'spicion, we got to believe he could do anything he set to do. It 'peared mighty wonderful to us, how he could set down in his cabin an' work the wires to go his way over in Mississippi as easy as here in Willowburne. May be, ef we had a'talked to him about it first, we never would a' been here now. He kept a'tellin' us to never do nothin' without askin' him about it first."

The silence was so profound when Buck stopped speaking that the men scarcely seemed to be breathing. At last Mr. Barrett found his voice.

"Do you mean to say," he questioned, "that Burrill Coleman was your leader, and that *he* planned the atrocious crimes that have made our country horrible within the past year?"

"Yes, sir; all but killin' Mr. Northcot. He never worked that, an' that's why we's here tonight. 'Twas the man what Mr. Alvah beat—po' Dick, who was hung at the court-house—what run that piece of business."

"Then we have the leader?" blurted out Barker, finding his speech.

"Yes, sir. You don't need to look no further. When you git Burrill, you got the brains an' the right hand of the whole thing." He shivered. "After Burrill Coleman's swung out of this world, there won't be none to take his place."

Mr. Barrett sat upon his horse like one stunned. Barker swore in his amazement, and every one else seemed dumbfounded. Barker turned to the other two negroes:

"Boys, is Buck telling the truth?"

"Yes, sir, he's tellin' the truth!"

Durieux passed his hand across his forehead. "Good God!" he groaned.

Burrill looked at him keenly, and his head sank upon his breast. He had been standing like a granite statue while Buck was talking. After a while he lifted his head and spoke:

"He says 'when Burrill Coleman's gone, there'll be none to take his place; the brain and right hand will be gone'." Burrill spoke slowly, meditatively, as though even in his extremity the praise was balm to his ambition. He glanced around and saw that some men were preparing to put a rope around his neck. He started back.

"Wait!" he cried, imperiously. "I ain't ready to go yet—there's something on my mind; 'taint much, but I want to tell it anyhow. Its bothered me more than all the other things, somehow. Where is Dr. Allison? He ain't here? Well, it don't make no difference. A heap of you all believes till yet that

Dr. Allison killed Mr. Sid and Mr. Vincent, but he never did. Dr. Allison's as good a man as ever lived. He set by Ella day and night and tried his best to save her life for me, like I begged him. I paid him for stayin'—paid him honest money what I had worked for,—but I couldn't pay him for his goodness to her." He paused. "I never committed but one murder, and I never got over that. I told the others how, and they never seemed to mind it. I shot Mr. Carroll. Me and Buck went there—just us two, 'cause we knew there was a big lot of money there. We fired, and Mr. Sid fell and Mr. Vincent ran into his room. We knew there was a gun in there, and we thought he would have the drop on us. A hand-car was comin', and we thought it was goin' to stop, but it went on through. I saw Dr. Allison get on his horse and ride off, and I knew he would be out of our way."

Burrill Coleman was not prepared for the effect his confession would have upon the friends of Carroll and Minor who were of the mob that night.

Mr. Barrett, Durieux, Wheeler, and Hays saw that they were as powerless before that body of determined men as so many straws upon the bosom of the mighty river. They turned and rode silently away, each oblivious to the other's presence.

Next morning, when the sun shone upon the tree nearest where Alvah Northcot's body was found, its rays fell full across three ghastly objects swinging from its sinless branches.

CHAPTER XXIX.

Durieux and Mr. Barrett rode side by side for some time, each so buried in thought that neither was aware who his companion was. There was a group of men ahead of them, riding silently away from the tragedy they had been unable to avert.

When the road along the base of the river was reached, the horses turned to the right, toward Sigma, and Durieux pulled his reins up suddenly and aroused himself from his reverie. Mr. Barrett looked up as the other came to an abrupt stop.

"Ah, Jules, won't you come on with me?"

Durieux replied: "No, thank you, Mr. Barrett, I can't go on to Sigma. Mr. Barrett—would it be asking too much of you to come back to the place with me? There is something I particularly wish to talk to you about. I— Don't you think you could come?"

Mr. Barrett looked at his watch, and hesitated when he saw how late it was; then he looked at Jules again, and responding to the earnest insistence so legible in his manner, he turned his horse's head toward the Englehart store, and together, by a different route from the one they had just passed over, they returned to the center of the place.

When they reached his room, Durieux rebuilt his fire, for it had grown cool, and the horror of the night's events had chilled him drearily.

As soon as the wood blazed brightly in the wide fireplace, Jules sank into a chair, and for a little while his head rested back and his hands hung listlessly by his side.

Mr. Barrett bent forward and stretched his hands

toward the merry, chattering flames, and Durieux pulled himself together.

There was a small round table between the two men, littered with magazines, and illuminated by the lamp that burned brightly upon it.

Durieux leaned an arm upon the table, and Mr. Barrett faced him.

"Mr. Barrett," he began, "you heard what Burrill said concerning the murder of Carroll and Minor."

"Yes."

Durieux cleared his husky voice and went on: "I am glad that he confessed. I am glad that all doubt of Dr. Allison's honor is at last cleared away. Are not you?"

"Yes, Jules; but still—"

"Well?" said Durieux, petulantly.

"My boy, why didn't Dr. Allison—" he hesitated again.

"Dr. Allison didn't simply because he couldn't. Mr. Barrett, if Edward Allison had told where he was that night, you would have blown his brains out."

"I? Jules, are you mad? Why should I have desired to do such a thing? I heard what the peddler woman said; she swore that Allison had gone to see a woman in a cabin on the back part of Lilyditch."

"Yes. He went to see a woman in a cabin on Lilyditch, and the woman—" Durieux stopped abruptly.

"The woman—" repeated his companion.

"Was Nellie Barrett."

"Good God! what do you mean?" Mr. Barrett bounded to his feet, and stood staring at the man before him like one dazed. Durieux returned his gaze firmly.

"I mean, Mr. Barrett, that Edward Allison had too much honor to use the name of the woman he loves to shield himself from death or disgrace."

Mr. Barrett sank into his chair again, and covered his face with his hands. "Merciful God!" he groaned; "why have I lived to see this day?"

Durieux sat silently watching him. What did it matter if one more heart was crushed and bleeding?

Mr. Barrett lifted his head and demanded fiercely: "Durieux, how many people know of this?"

"The two lovers, the Syrian, Allen, and I."

Mr. Barrett moaned: "If the negroes know of it, there is no hope of secrecy." Mr. Barrett avoided meeting Durieux' eyes. "How did you find this out, Jules?"

"From Miss Nellie herself."

"What! did she have the assurance to tell you that she was in the habit of meeting her lover in a deserted negro cabin?"

Durieux swore inwardly. "No, she did not," he answered, tartly.

Mr. Barrett looked at him in surprise. "Did not you tell me—"

"I did not tell you that she was 'in the habit' of doing anything," Durieux flashed angrily. Again a slight breath against a woman's honor was raising a whirlwind of suspicion.

Mr. Barrett looked vexed, and Jules went on more calmly:

"I told you, sir, that Miss Nellie told me that on the night of December 27th, at the hours between twelve and half past three, she was in the cabin with Dr. Allison. She sent for him, and he came at her request. You had made him pledge not to seek her, and so she sought him to tell him that she was going away."

"And she told you this, when she would not tell it to me?"

"She was not afraid of me. She was starving for sympathy—for some one to blame her and know the

part she had in her lover's embarrassment. You know, sir, that Miss Nellie and I have been together a great deal. Ever since she was a child, in fact, and we are," he added, stroking his handsome mustache to conceal the bitter curves his lips shaped themselves into, "we are, you know, quite like 'sisters'."

The older man was too deeply engrossed in his own pain to notice another's sarcasm. He rested his tired head upon his hand thoughtfully.

"Jules, if the child wanted to see the fellow that badly, why in the name of heaven didn't she come to me?" he said, irritably. "Have I ever denied my children anything that money or trouble could procure?"

The young man shrugged his shoulders characteristically, and smiled under cover of repairing the fire. Mr. Barrett took a cigar from his pocket, and began to smoke violently. After a protracted silence, Durieux spoke with effort:

"Now that Dr. Allison is fully reinstated in public opinion," he began, stiffly, "you will, I trust, waive all objection to his offering his love to Miss Nellie."

"No, sir, I will not!" Mr. Barrett brought his fist down upon the table vehemently. "My objections to Dr. Allison did not arise from his trouble at Lauren's Station, but were based upon aversions established prior to that most unfortunate occurrence."

"Poor little girl," murmured Durieux, half to himself. He sighed heavily. "Well," he went on, sadly, "it matters little, I suppose. She is clearly not long for this world of wickedness and woe."

Mr. Barrett's elbow rested upon the arm of his chair, and his eyes were covered by his hand. He was silent for a long time. The little clock on the mantelpiece struck two, vindictively, and he started. Drawing his handkerchief from his pocket, he blew his nose carefully, repeatedly, and Durieux, watching him with that

same half-sardonic smile, waited for him to speak.

"Jules, has Allison returned from his visit to his mother?"

"I believe he has. I think some one said he got back some weeks ago."

Mr. Barrett arose and pushed his chair back. "Jules, I will think of what you say. Perhaps I may eventually overcome my dislike for him. You can not imagine what a disappointment Nellie's infatuation for this handsome nobody is to me." Mr. Barrett sighed heavily. "I had thought, Jules, that some day you would ask me for my little girl. There is no one to whom I would so willingly give her as to you."

Durieux staggered. That Mr. Barrett liked him, trusted him, he knew; but that he would have given Nellie to him—to a penniless drudge who worked for a salary on a retired plantation—he had never for a moment imagined. To him, who had hidden his love for the daughter because he was too proud to encounter the father's scorn. Cruel, jeering fate, that came to tell him what he had lost!

Durieux stood staring at the floor, his face averted, his hands clinched behind him. Mr. Barrett tried to laugh reassuringly, and nervously held out his hand.

"Well, well, my boy, do not feel remorse because you have failed me in the one thing I most wanted you to do. Hearts must be perverse, I suppose, as long as the world lasts, and we will have to bow our necks to the yoke of the inevitable. I will think—I will take your advice and try to make your two young friends happy. Nellie shall never have to run off from home again to see her lovers. I shall write to Allison and tell him that he may at least come to see her in her own home."

Durieux clasped his friend's hand as cordially as it was extended. He had gained his object, and his pale, drawn lips worded his thanks.

CHAPTER XXX.

Mr. Barrett kept his word. He wrote to Dr. Allison, and that overjoyed young man lost no time in replying to the letter in person. He found Mr. Barrett alone in his office, and there followed a long interview, consisting of questioning and explanations.

Dr. Allison was a happy man indeed. The burden of doubt being lifted from his character, brought him a peace he had not known for months; and this relief, added to the friendly attitude of the man who had so much power to make or mar his bliss, made his spirits seem winged and freed from all earthly bondage.

Fortune seemed suddenly to have only smiles for him. The acme of his professional ambition had also been gained. An old friend of his father's, a physician possessed of no small share of fame, had offered to take him into partnership, as a token of appreciation of the old-time friendship of the father's, and the young man's intrinsic merits. This prospect seemed particularly glowing, now that there was a chance of winning Nellie Barrett to share success with him. He would no longer be separated from his mother and sisters; no longer compelled to work his way from the very bottom of his profession, but aided in locating himself half-way up, mounting the remainder by his own endeavor, seemed to add new zest to the gifts the goddess graciously bestowed.

He had come back from his old home with the determination to terminate his engagement as plantation physician as soon as Col. Laurens could find a man to take his place, and then he would return to his native town to begin life all over again, as it were.

Little did he expect, when he again set foot on Lauren's dark soil, that a few days more would result clearing his name of suspicion, and his heart of its weight of denied love.

Almost three months had elapsed since he had seen the girl of his truest, fondest affection; and when Mr. Barrett suggested that they would go to Nellie and tell her that he had withdrawn his objections to an engagement, the invitation was eagerly accepted.

Nellie's surprise at her father's generosity was only exceeded by her happiness. She was anxious that Mr. Barrett should know how entirely free from blame her lover was throughout the terrible trial that had so nearly wrecked his life, and volunteered to confess her midnight escapade; but Mr. Barrett laughingly waved her off, and told her that he knew all.

"Father," she cried, "how did you hear? Dr. Allison, did you tell?"

Allison shook his head.

The girl blushed hotly, and turned again to her father.

"Did Mr. Durieux—"

Mr. Barrett laughed again, and nodded, and Nellie's cheeks grew suddenly pale.

There was to be no announcement of the engagement for several months, and it was understood that Dr. Allison was to return in the spring-time that was one year hence to take away his bride.

The two or three weeks remaining of Dr. Allison's stay at Lauren's passed like a summer dream. He came almost daily to visit his betrothed; and Nellie, radiant with the intoxicating tonic of hope and happiness, regained her spirit, her rosy cheeks, her sparkling eyes, and her graceful vivacity.

Jules Durieux was too busy to visit much. Planting was well under way, and he was kept closely fol-

lowing his plow hands. He had never been so hard worked before that he could not spend an evening or a Sunday at the Barrett's; but somehow people took Durieux' word in this, as they did in other things, and he was not unnecessarily questioned.

The one time that he did call before Dr. Allison left the parish, he was as gay and entertaining as of old, and no one guessed how leaden his heart lay or how hatefully conspicuous one tiny object, the glittering ring upon Nellie's finger, was to his weary eyes.

Dr. Allison went to his new work buoyed with all that goes toward a man's worldly bliss. Success and love were his; what more was there to crave?

With the coming of the summer months and respite from the more active part of the planter's life, a calm in his affairs that preceded the vigorous sway of king Cotton, social functions thrust themselves into prominence once more and became the delight of the youth and maidens. There had been no large entertainment with its banquet and band of good music since the tournament, and the young folks looked upon Dr. Allison's visit in August as an excellent excuse for another great affair, to take place in the town hall at Sigma.

There had been minor social gatherings at intervals all along, presided over by the country fiddler or perhaps two young darkies with lusty lungs and French harps, but these, although enjoyed in a measure, were rather a hollow mockery to any but the youngest members of the little social world.

Mr. Durieux had attended none of these parties and had remained closely at Englehart from the time when Mr. Barrett told him confidentially and with comparative cheerfulness of the arrangements for Nellie's marriage to Dr. Allison the following year. The few times he went to the house, his visits were short and he oc-

cupied himself mostly in discussing business affairs with Mr. Barrett.

Nellie was forced to acknowledge to herself how sorely she missed the pleasant intercourse that he was denying her, and her injured feelings arose in rebellion against his conspicuous indifference toward her. She would rather he came and teased her or scolded her, than that he should ignore her so poignantly.

She regretted the absence of her lover daily, and told herself that she would not be so lonely and aimless if he were near enough to visit her and relieve by his presence the monotony of country existence. Gentlemen friends came to the house as formerly, but in comparison with the pleasure of Dr. Allison's society their calls seemed insipid and profitless. At first she took her long rides alone, but as the days grew warmer and longer she abandoned them altogether and found her only recourse in the daily letter to and from her affianced; and some days she remorsefully detected an increasing aversion to writing, too.

At last he came, however, her handsome, brilliant lover, and all nature took on a brighter, merrier coloring. He was Mr. Barrett's guest, and the August days with their lingering twilights seemed susceptible of improvement by the addition of more hours in which to exchange the precious nothingness of love's communion.

The subject of the ball was broached, and like a golden ball started down hill, its course was sped until the goal was reached.

Nellie and Dr. Allison were a little late in arriving upon the festive scene, and almost every one was there before them. Wheeler was leaning lazily against the door as she entered the ball-room, and Nellie's quick perception soon made her conscious of who was and who was not there.

She bit her lip proudly and fought against the disappointment she was forced to acknowledge. That Durieux would attend the ball she had not for a moment doubted. It was aggravating, hateful of him, she inwardly declared, to stay away when he knew that he was the best waltzer in the parish, and that she had often told him how much she preferred him as a partner to all others.

The evening was half spent and she had at last relinquished all hope that he had been detained or would reconsider and come anyway. She was waltzing with Wheeler, and after a silence she had unconsciously maintained despite his efforts to the contrary, she said, with exaggerated indifference:

"Mr. Durieux did not come, did he?"

"No'm."

"I wonder why?" Nellie pulled herself together angrily. The very words she had vowed not to utter had escaped her in spite of her rigid resolve.

"Oh," said Wheeler, "Jules says he's getting too old for such frivolities as balls." He watched beneath his eyelashes and saw the girl's bare neck grow pinker. He had been laboring under some impressions of his own for some time—ever since the tournament, in fact. He did not really *know* anything, for no one had told him of Nellie's engagement to Allison, and Jules had tried to keep his own affairs to himself; but he had been gradually piecing bits of information together until his collection almost formed a complete fabric. He, like Dr. Allison, had the greatest respect and admiration for Nellie, and almost adored Durieux, so it is not much wonder that he viewed this complication of heartstrings from his own point of vantage and almost allowed an exclamation of victory to escape him when a certain conclusion was thrust upon him. He awaited conviction, and Nellie said:

"I don't see why he should say that."

"Who—say what?" demanded Wheeler blankly.

"Why, Mr. Durieux. You said he said he was too old to dance. That's nonsense!" she said, irritably.

"Well, really," began Wheeler, indolently, "perhaps that's so; but Jules is so taken up with his studies I believe he doesn't care a snap for anything else." He turned quickly to keep his partner from being bumped by a wild dancer who was rushing towards them, and Nellie almost lost step. She quickly regained time, and asked:

"What is he studying?"

"Who? Oh, Jules? Well, when I left, he was interviewing Mr. Prescott. I think he wants to read up on the history of the country before he goes. He's been freshening his knowledge of the language, too. You know Jules is a natural linguist, and added considerable Spanish to his *repertoire* while he was in New Orleans." Again Wheeler guided quickly to one side to avoid a collision in the crowd.

"Where is he going?"

"Who?"

"Why, Mr. Durieux!" said Nellie, vexed with Wheeler's stupidity.

"Oh, why, didn't Jules tell you that he was going to Mexico soon?" Wheeler's surprise was a little overdone, but it was not detected. "He has a friend there in some government position, who wants Jules to join him—quite a remunerative office, I believe,—and Jules has about decided to accept."

The band stopped abruptly, and Wheeler offering his arm to Nellie, they began to promenade.

"When is he going?"

"Who?" repeated Wheeler, and the girl could scarcely repress the inclination to turn and shake him angrily.

"Who have we been talking about?" she demanded severely, her cheeks flushed.

"Let me see," mused he, stroking his mustache on the side nearest Nellie, as his shoulders shook with suppressed amusement; "was it Durieux?"

"Never mind who it was," she said, tartly. Dr. Allison came up, and, taking his arm, she deserted Wheeler without apologies; and he, figurative tossing up his hat with a war-whoop, followed them meekly out upon the gallery, and spent a few moments in surveying his structure of circumstantial evidence and adding a block or two more that strengthened the foundation and finished off certain parts.

The lovers walked the length of the gallery several times, and Dr. Allison tried to converse, but Nellie was preoccupied and scarcely heard what he said. The young man felt wounded by her abstraction while with him, and asked her if she was tired.

"Yes, I am," she said, "just as tired as I can be. I wish it was time to go home. Let us sit down."

They found chairs near the banister, but still Nellie did not seem disposed to talk. The band began a brilliant polka, and Dr. Allison arose gallantly: "This is our set, isn't it?"

He expected her to arise, but she still retained her seat and said plaintively: "Please let us not dance—I feel too tired."

"Certainly; just as you wish," Allison said kindly, and, willing to humor her mood, he maintained silence.

"Let us go in," Nellie said, somewhat fretfully, after a long pause; "it's too cool out here."

They went back into the ball-room, and Nellie secured a seat by her mother; but there was no other near, so Allison left her and went to a doorway, where he leaned against the casement, watching the throng promenading before him and wondering, somewhat

provoked, at Nellie's indifference to everything. She had looked forward to the ball with such high spirits and eager anticipation that he was puzzled to see now how inert she had become.

He was still looking at her as the band began playing a languorous waltz. He watched Wheeler go up to Nellie and bend over her. The girl's eyes seemed to brighten, and she looked up and smiled gaily. She got up, and Wheeler slipping his arm about her, they floated across the floor.

Dr. Allison saw it all—Nellie's awakened interest and the alacrity with which she accepted Wheeler's invitation to dance.

"The third time with him tonight, and only once with me!"

Dr. Allison walked out on the gallery in no enviable frame of mind.

CHAPTER XXXI.

Three weeks more glided into oblivion. Dr. Allison's visit terminated, and the ball in his honor was slowly being forgotten; but still Mr. Durieux did not go to see Nellie, nor did she hear anything more of his purposed departure. She was resolute in not allowing herself to ask any questions about him, and no one volunteered to tell her of him.

One morning Durieux rode in from Englehart to consult Mr. Barrett about a new piece of machinery for the gin, and great was his annoyance to find that that gentleman not only was not at his office, but was at home suffering from a slight bilious attack.

"This is most unfortunate," he muttered. "The gin ought to be running now, and it is urgent that the order for this thing should get off in today's mail."

"Well, go on and see Barrett about it then," Mr. Henderson said, surprised that Jules had not already done so, in stopping at the store to lament the senior partner's absence.

Durieux hesitated. "Oh, I hate to disturb a sick man with such petty worries," he evaded.

"Go on and see him, I say; he is not too sick to talk to you. I was there to see him myself this morning, and he told me he was only staying at home to please his wife. Go on. There is no use delaying when it is so important to get the ginning under way."

Thus urged, there was no help for it, and Durieux reluctantly betook him to Mr. Barrett's handsome home.

He was dismounted and at the steps before he discovered that Nellie was sweeping the gallery, and both

taken by surprise, an awkward greeting resulted. Nellie showed him the way to her father's room, and returned to her work. Lillie, too, was sick, and this increased the young lady's household duties. A darkey had been called in from the cotton picking to take Lillie's place over the stove; and Nellie had been wondering all morning which was the lesser work, to initiate an ignoramus, or do the work one's self. Mrs. Barrett declared decidedly in favor of the latter, and Nellie was being won to her opinion.

When Durieux came out of the house, a half hour later, he found Nellie sitting on the children's jostling-board in the shade of an old magnolia tree that grew near the steps. She had taken off her check-work apron, and her sun-bonnet was pushed back from her face. As Durieux neared her he lifted his hat, and would have passed on, but she smiled, and said to him in his sweet, seductive mother-tongue:

"Don't be in a hurry. Sit down; I want to talk to you."

He silently obeyed her, taking a seat on the farther end of the board.

"This is an exquisite day, isn't it?" the girl said, by way of showing him that she wanted to talk.

"Yes." Durieux used the crisp English word, and sat bent forward, one arm resting on his knee, staring at the short grass which he cut at monotonously with his riding-whip.

Nellie laughed nervously. "I thought I had something to say to you," she said, indifferently, "but it seems I haven't."

Durieux arose to his feet. "I'd better go, then; I'm in something of a hurry this morning."

He started down the long walk that led through the lawn to the front gate, and the girl arose and followed at his side. They reached the gate, and he extended his hand to open it.

"Mr. Durieux," began Nellie, swinging her bonnet by each side close to her face, "you haven't been a very good sister to me lately."

Jules started.

"Nor a friend, either," she persisted.

"I know it," the man said, testily. "I told you an untruth when I said I was your friend. I did not mean to deceive you, nor myself either. I have tried to be, but it is impossible."

His voice dropped so low she could scarcely hear what he said, and there was the quaver in it that she had heard once before. "I have tried to be a friend to you and failed." His tones strengthened, and he went on vehemently: "I don't want to be your friend. I don't want you to be happy—I lied when I said I did! I am simply your lover, and I will never be anything else."

Nellie was leaning against the gate, her hand upon the top, unconscious that she was keeping him in. He stood moodily before her, his arms folded and his eyes bent upon the ground. He went on speaking, after a pause:

"It is folly to suppose that a man can be two things to a woman at once," he said, decisively.

Nellie looked at him quickly, and a little half-smile played in her eyes.

"Is a man never two things to a woman at once?" she queried softly. "When he becomes a husband, does he cease to be a lover?"

Durieux muttered a short exclamation. "I suppose Dr. Allison may be able to occupy both positions at once," he said, without raising his eyes. There was a long pause, and he twisted and bit his mustache unmercifully. With an effort, he roused himself and lifted his hat.

"Miss Nellie, I must trouble you to let me pass. There is business I must attend to."

The girl flushed indignantly, and with her hand still upon the gate, she said with defiance:

"Before you go, I want to tell you that the engagement which your interference in family affairs resulted in arranging has ended disastrously, and that Dr. Allison has taken my pretty ring away from me."

Durieux started violently and stared at the girl, amazed. She threw the gate wide open and turning, walked rapidly toward the house. He called to her twice but she would not stop. She was determined that he should not see her tears.

Jules stood like one dreaming and watched her until she was lost sight of in the depths of the hall; then he sprang upon his horse and galloped away.

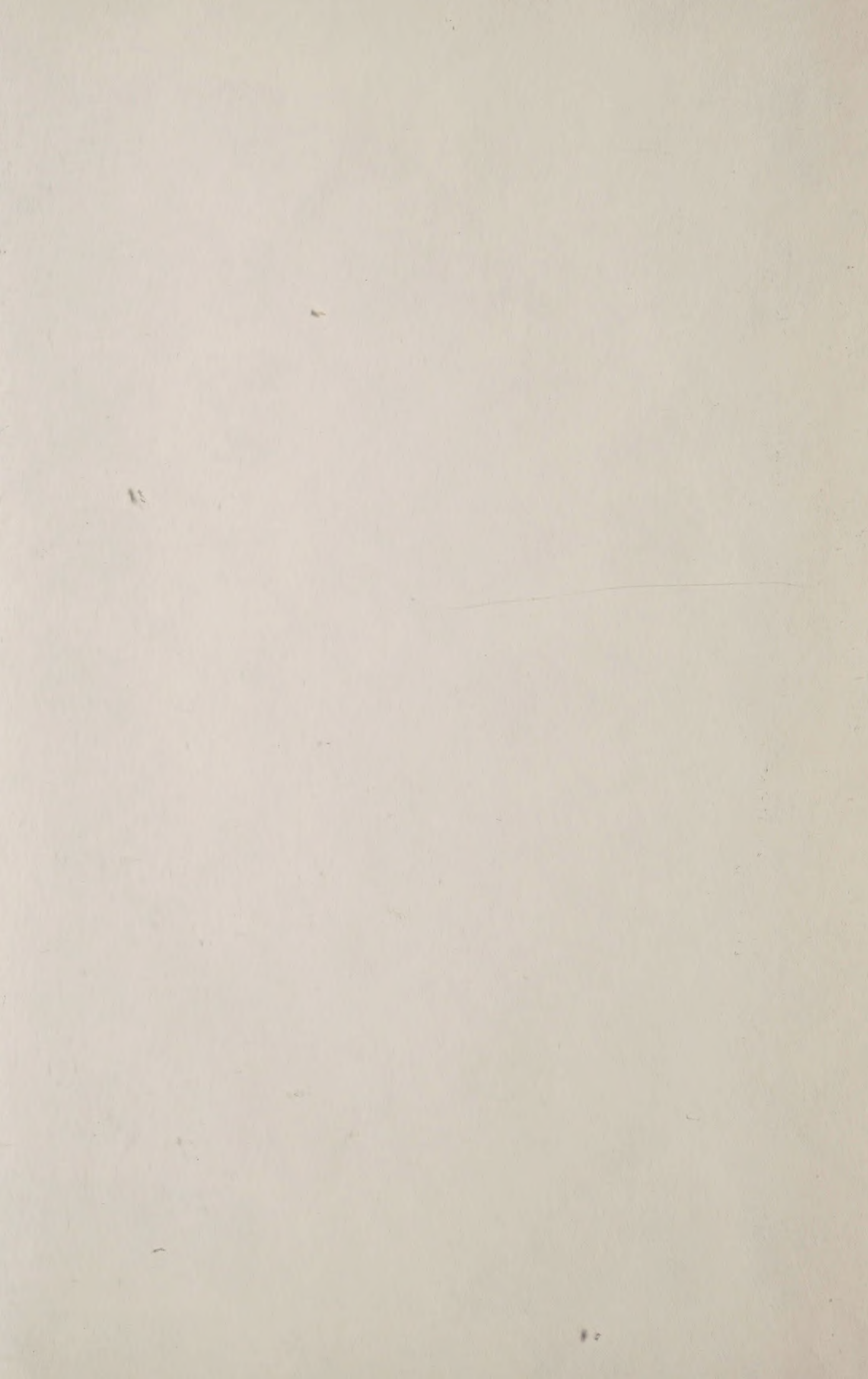
That afternoon he came again. He brought his buggy and Nellie went with him for a long drive.

When they returned Mr. Barrett was sitting on the front gallery. Durieux walked up to him and said:

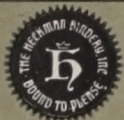
"Congratulate me, Mr. Barrett. I'm the happiest man on earth. I'm to be married soon."

Mr. Barrett stared. "Eh, Jules? Why I'm glad to hear of it. I did not suspect that you had any such ideas—" He turned to look at his daughter to see what she thought of the surprising news, but Nellie had flown into the house.

THE END.





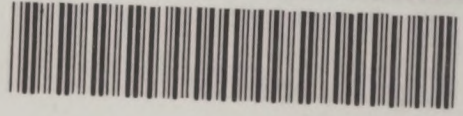


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